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WOMAN AND ROCOCO  
IN FRANCE

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MARIE FEL  
Pastel by M.-Q. de Latour  
*Musée Saint-Quentin (now in the Louvre)*

# WOMAN & ROCOCO IN FRANCE

SEEN THROUGH THE LIFE AND  
WORKS OF A CONTEMPORARY  
CHARLES-PINOT DUCLOS

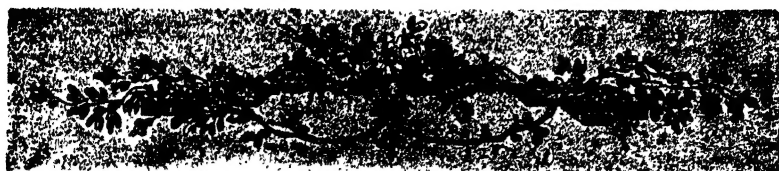
*by*  
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# A VISION





## A VISION



It is a warm, golden afternoon in August, in the year 1911. For the last few hours I have been strolling through the streets of Saint-Quentin, which stretch out before me stark and prosaic like the practical French mind of yesterday. Now and then a cart rattles over the fitful cobblestones and scares away sportive cats and dogs into corners; listless shoppers shuffle sleepily among the rival splendours of a bazaar, the proprietor of which dozes in the doorway and seems irremediably parched of tongue. From a bow-windowed building gushes forth a flood of schoolboys and girls in black uniform, noisily waking from their studious somnolence. A *cuisinière*, ambling along beside her shopping-basket, battles gaspingly against the surging stream, which rushes past and flings itself with whoops of delight upon the nearest fruit-stall. I turn off toward the Champs-Élysées. On the benches loll tired townsfolk who have not properly shaken off their afternoon's forty winks; over the gravel paths drowsy nursemaids drag themselves along behind squeaky prams; ice-cream merchants ply a clattering trade—here at last is the Rue Antoine-Lécuyer, and forthwith I find myself in front of the Musée Latour. I almost hesitate after my wanderings to lay my hand on the sturdy black Renaissance gate that wards off the deserted street from the main building. In the Cour d'Honneur the provincial sun philistinely broods; a man with a stubble face that smiles from countless wrinkles attaches himself to me. At my request he leads me up a sort of winding staircase, past art lumber and local antiquities, to the holy place of my pilgrimage. But he is not at all a bad sort, this old fellow. Softly he pulls the

blinds half-way down, soundlessly he retreats to the door; I catch a half-questioning, half-jealous glance, then I am by myself.

The three narrow brown rooms are flooded with golden twilight. Frame after frame, portraits crowd the walls; all eyes are turned upon me, and hostile glances seem to bid me begone. I retire into a corner and let the spell begin to work with me. Now there rises through the room a sound as of the muted clash of swords, the rustle of old silk, and the muffled tap of high wooden heels. Then the interrupted conversation breaks out anew.

Surrounded by his family, Louis XV gazes with vulgar hauteur at the motley throng about him. The gentle Dauphin leans indifferently near by; to him clings that moodily precocious child, the Duc de Bourgogne, doomed to early death. Queen Marie is in playful vein to-day: she darts good-humoured roguishness at her *vis-à-vis* from the black lace that masks her eyes, her mouth is curved for raillery, the folded fan held poised over lax fingers. Marie-Joséphine de Saxe has drawn her little son out of the crowd, and holds his hand as she gives a mother's counsels. *This* Pompadour has every reason to hold herself aloof from the Court: it is Mlle Poisson, whose eyes goggle at the company above a commonplace nose; downy hair stains her upper lip, and on the wan mouth dies away an ambiguous jest. Here the burly Maréchal de Saxe has planted his Teutonic bulk; in his big blue eyes gleams masterful will, and his sensual lips dream of nights of kisses. Toward him comes Maréchal Loewendahl, a womanish smile fluttering round his dimpled chin. Hard by d'Argenson's disdainful, melancholy face rises above his bright cuirass. Full of winning cordiality, the Collector de Julienne goes from group to group, lingers a moment here by the chair of the purse-proud financier La Reynière, exchanges a word there with the proverbial cuckold of the century, La Popelinière, and comes to rest at last, fascinated by the gaze of Mme de la Popelinière, who raises sharp eyes from her notebook. Her Scapin face has in it something of the pert wit of the actress Dangeville, who stands near by, making great play with her sparkling eyes. Mme Favart, round whose nose and mouth gambol a thousand merry imps, has just tossed her a rallying remark, toward which the third member of the group, the *danseuse* Camargo, preserves an oddly dignified gravity. Her colleague, Puvigné, creates a *furor* near her with her long, velvet eyes; but the *buffo* Manelli bounds past, with wild, inane laugh

and peruke jokingly awry, making his way through the assembly to where Monnet, director of the Opéra, discreetly and retiringly musters his little world. In a corner the serious people have gathered. Youthful fire still burns in old Crébillon's sunken cheeks, and his eyes say, "Je n'ai pas quatre-vingts ans; c'est mon extrait baptismal qui les a." Duclos chats, every inch the flawless courtier, with his colleague of the Académie, d'Alembert, who listens with a soulless, almost geometrical smile. The Abbé Huber has his nose deep in a folio tome, oblivious to the life that swirls about him in a thousand different shapes. Jean-Jacques, however, wears the mask of one who loves his fellow-men, as in the days of *Le Devin du village*.

Like phantoms of pain and pleasure, meanwhile, nameless girl-figures glide and flit among the groups and draw men's gaze after them from room to room. With what enthusiasm now Latour's eye lights up as he scans this restless pageant of material! There he stands to one side, in *atelier* smock and beret, with pointed nose, staring; tremendous zest for life lurks in that mouth with its wide smile, rises in the deep corners of his eyes. Something akin to ecstasy flames in his gaze as he becomes aware of the strange being in the *salon* doorway—an unknown creature in this swarm of glittering vanities. In the delicately oval face, beneath a classic forehead and lofty brows, two velvet eyes dream of unutterably complete surrender; they open as if the breath of loving lips had but this moment drifted thereover, the sensitive nostrils seem still a-quiver with the rapture of kisses that have cloyed her grateful mouth. Round her loose hair is fancifully wound a blue, gold-bordered gauze, daintily fastened on the left side by flowers—a vision of Oriental enchantment. Thus has Marie Fel stolen into the brilliant rout, and each moment may ravish the entrancing sight away. . . .

A light step startles me: I am standing in front of the enigmatic picture, and at the door the old man, sharply outlined in the evening glow, is beckoning me to come. I take a last, swift look about me in the room where years ago the rustling and the whispering were hushed and now long shadows cluster about the frames; then I pass out into the twilight. Rosy clouds frisk round the setting sun, which once Latour, in lovely delirium, greeted as his brother, and a blue haze as of fairyland floats above the darkening streets of his native town.





# INTRODUCTION





## FRENCH ROCOCO, THE QUINTESSENCE OF FRENCH FEMININITY

La tristesse des menuets  
Fait chanter mes désirs muets,  
Et je pleure  
D'entendre frémir cette voix  
Qui vient de si loin, d'autrefois,  
Et qui pleure.

F. GREGH, *La Maison de l'enfance*



IF we all sigh for bygone days, we never see them except through the golden veil of our unfulfilled, unspoken dreams; and the French eighteenth century particularly inspires in us a curiously sharp, mingled regret. A Titanic but hopeless struggle for intellectual domination of the external world, even at the sacrifice of the heart's subtle and shy claims; the devil's own destructive criticism of everything that met the eye, yet a feeble apathy toward vigorous reform; and, as some sort of temporary check upon the widening rift beneath, all the veneer of an old, purely formal culture—there in a nutshell you have this most French of centuries. “Il y a des empires qui ne sont jolis que dans leur décadence, comme l'empire français,” writes Galiani in one of his letters. In another place he contrasts the careless, swinging *joie de vivre* of youthful races with the gloomy introspection of Western creeds, and he concludes, “Nous sommes vieux.” Still, to contemporary minds the *grand siècle*<sup>1</sup> must have seemed a Golden Age that could never come again. Prince Henry of Prussia, brother of the great Frederick, confesses on his departure from Versailles in 1784, “J’ai passé la plus grande partie de ma vie à

<sup>1</sup> Michelet.

désirer de voir la France ; je vais en employer le reste à la regretter." Scores of people who lived in those days dwell upon that "douceur de vivre particulière au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle." A writer of such wide repute as Duclos proclaims *urbi et orbi*, "Le siècle de Louis XIV dure encore, malgré les déclamations de ceux qui ne contribuent en rien à sa gloire." Yes, the pre-Revolution eighteenth century too is great in its own way, and nothing could better characterize (with due differences) the mysterious fascination of this period than what Voltaire said about the Greeks: "Les ouvrages des Grecs sont comme la Grèce: pleine de défauts, de superstition, de faiblesses ; mais le premier peuple de la terre."

To greatness in an absolute sense, however, greatness born as in Greece and at the Renaissance, from ruthless war between gigantic he-vices and he-virtues, this elegant age is far from having attained. The eighteenth century was unique in being quite ordinary. It had an effeminate, almost flabby mediocrity ; and, in fact, the infinitely varied contact of polished mediocrities with one another in the flux of social life was the very basis of its flexible external culture. It was below the average, it sometimes bordered upon inconceivable barbarism, in the technique of everyday affairs, as will be made clear later ; but, above all, it was mediocre in its moral and intellectual stature. This century hardly tolerates, much less aspires to, extraordinary greatness ; Montesquieu is looked upon as a queer eccentric, Voltaire owes a good part of his reputation to his crabbed aloofness, Rousseau listens at the keyholes of this adamant society as a menial outsider. "Il faut des hommes ; mais pour des hommes de génie, point !"<sup>1</sup>

Smooth, wheedling mediocrity permeates indifferently the various social grades. As in the days of Rome's decadence, so in this century too the proletarian joins hands with the worker, the worker with the man of means, the man of means with the man of vast wealth, the man of vast wealth again with the proletarian, in one last mad fling. A narrow, exclusive caste of the great, with hothouse nerves and no scruples about gratifying them, herds along, as in the Cinquecento, the panting, wretched masses ; but instead of the lash the strong fist of the *condottiere* wielded the Rococo *seigneur* holds a clouded cane in his delicate white hand. The rags that at Opéra *bergeries* and 'peasants' weddings' thrust themselves impudently to the fore among the gay dresses

<sup>1</sup> Diderot.

are refused notice ; the battle of life sinks to an affair of slanderous pinpricks and the exchange of sword-scratches between rivals in love ; amid the fluttering of fans and amorous glances in the cosy corner of La Pompadour's boudoir Court *savants* satisfactorily dispose of the people's need ; ultimate wisdom lies in a graceful toying with life according to the famous prescription of the Prince de Ligne, " Je voudrais être une jolie femme jusqu'à trente ans, puis un général d'armée fort habile et fort heureux jusqu'à soixante, enfin cardinal jusqu'à quatre-vingts." It is this sublime *insouciance* we see in the epicure Grimod de la Reynière's assertion, made with Olympian detachment, that from the beginning of the Revolution to the end not a single decent turbot came upon the Paris market. (This man brings a touch of fairyland into the arid life of his generation, and gives those etiquette-stiff, affected people a taste for gipsy parties in *cabarets* and spiritist *séances*.) It is this elfin irresponsibility that has lured so many poets, from Théophile Gautier to Fernand Gregh, back to that exquisite age in which people, careless of what would follow, shook off the very last bonds that tied them to reality, and nothing on earth was of any consequence except beautiful outward show. Or beautiful make-believe, which has always been mediocrity's way of dealing with the harsh facts of life. A comedy in five acts Taine calls the daily ceremonial of Versailles ; and on a thousand big and little stages in Paris the same piece was played with varying *décor*. The heroic spirit of an emasculate *noblesse* degenerates to posing ; the clergy's sense of duty yields to the mummer's arts, if we may credit that delicious tale of the place-seeker who first of all presents his application in verse, then warbles to the tuneful string, crowns his performance by a dance, and with a graceful *entrechat* skips right into his fat benefice ! The most intimate of life's activities now take place in the full light of day. The scented *déshabillé* in which the beauty, at her dressing-table or in bed, receives her caller, is designed to tempt his kindling gaze to long-drawn-out appreciation of her half-disclosed charms ; just as her conversation invites him to a shuttlecock exchange of delicate salacities. In the Venetian mirror she can watch her every gesture when she wants to make a conquest, and the sly tricks of her rivals are soon foiled. *La mode*, in dress, becomes an affectation of lubricity ; social life is affectation with a dash of wit ; Rousseau copies out his most fervid vows of love from *brouillons*, and the

memoirs of the time introduce its people more or less naked to an expectant public. Love and betrayal are as unreal as on the stage, vice is simply *un petit goût*: "Ces deux hommes-là ne sont que des épluchures des grands vices," said Mme Geoffrin scornfully of Maréchal Richelieu and the libertine de Voisenon. Even death is just the falling of the curtain, and a dying artist (Watteau) will not kiss the crucifix that is offered him, because it is too crudely carved.

This artificiality in life is accompanied by artificiality in art. The falsity to nature of the *tragédie classique* has already been demonstrated, with surprising sensitiveness, by the Germanically unsubtle Grimm. Nothing but the conventionalization of wanton desires is to be found in the nymph pictures from Watteau down to Baudouin—a sweet disorder of the dress reaching its climax in the latter painter's graceful indiscretions. The pastel, soft as down, is the very medium for a powdered age; apt as Dresden and Sèvres teacups to the sex's dainty taper fingers. In the creations of Charpentier, artist in shoes, not even the most ethereal Rococo princess dare put foot to floor; they are of an unearthly fineness, and no less adorable than that drapery before which its sculptor, Pygmalion, ecstatically cast himself on his knees. We find, too, that this Society idolizes the pleasures that last but a second—as in every period of decadence; and we remember Cleopatra, who dissolved a priceless pearl in Chian wine to swallow a fortune at one draught.

Even the most elegant performance of elegant daily rituals, if without passionate motive-power behind it, stiffens into routine and tedium. Slowly, therefore, and like lead, over this whole culture descends a mortal *ennui*. To escape it men are for ever inventing new diversions; which in turn, through endless and despairing repetition, lead back again in a vicious circle to *ennui*. At last Society ceases to struggle against the dreadful foe, treats it as a sort of joke, tries to coax it into amiability. The Abbé Galiani, who with his monkeyishly nimble wit did all that man could do to amuse his age, harmonized his experience of life into a cosmogony of boredom. Question: Why did God create the world out of nothing? Answer: Nothing was bored to death and begged God to deliver it from its predicament of being nothing. "C'est donc l'ennui mortel de notre mère qui nous a mis dans le cas d'exister. Elle s'ennuyait d'être néant, et voilà pourquoi

nous nous ennuyons tous dans ce bas monde." The philosopher Helvétius tackles the enemy with a poem, *Sur les avantages de l'ennui*, and hymns boredom as mother of all great talents. To yet a third writer, the Abbé Barthélemy, any mode of combating tedium is fair in this crusade—even a toss from horseback and a broken collar-bone. Nowhere do we find a really manly effort to struggle out of the slough. The victims would much rather luxuriate in imagining the pleasures of a wealthy Turk living on the Bosphorus, who, lapped in soft cushions, turns his gaze from the sparkling waters to let it glide lingeringly over the splendid limbs of the slave-girls who dance naked before him, and smells the intoxicating perfumes that coil ceilingward from the ground; then reaches indolently for his cup of *mocha*, and in the bliss of the sacred drink feels earth and heaven swoon away. At Chanteloup, the country residence of the ex-Minister Choiseul, idleness took the place of all the other divine virtues. "Il n'y règne plus qu'un sentiment, qu'une vertu : c'est une extrême paresse et cette vie est sans doute celle du ciel, car elle est fort heureuse."<sup>1</sup> It is to idleness and the pleasures of the senses that that spoilt child of fortune, Bernis, abandons his destiny :

Pour éterniser sa mémoire,  
On perd ses moments les plus doux :  
Pourquoi chercher si loin la gloire ?  
Le plaisir est si près de nous.

Even the very sweetest of pastimes, love, sinks to *délicieux ennui*. Nay, the age has a high-priestess of its supreme deity, a *virtuosa* in all the arts of trifling with, placating, cheating, evading boredom, Mme du Deffand.

For all their rich worldly experience none of these victims or hierophants of *ennui* grasped the elementary truth that one touch of *bonté* gives greater peace and security to the empty heart than all the treasures of the most glowing imagination. He who plucks too hastily the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge eats therewith the death of his soul—that ghastly selfishness which is an ugly stain on all purely intellectual cultures. Louis XV is the most perfect type of this ice-smooth egoism, as of the elegant and inhuman cruelty of a decadent civilization. Displays of feeling like Voltaire's warm efforts on behalf of Calas, Sirven, La Barre, the secret philanthropy of Diderot and Duclos, motherly affection such as

<sup>1</sup> Barthélemy.



Mme Geoffrin showed her *protégés*, or Mme d'Épinay's generous behaviour toward Rousseau, throw the drab heartlessness of this period into the greater damaging relief. It is responsible, too, for that vague atmosphere of sadness which surrounds the intellectuals; that *ennui de la solitude* so characteristic of an unsentimental age; those heart-rending sighs *à la mode de Chateaubriand*, like that saying of the Chevalier d'Aydie (who seems, however, in his matchless idyll with that paragon of love, Aïssé, to have exhausted all the possibilities of happiness the century held): "Puisqu'on se console d'être homme, il ne faut s'affliger de rien." Count Tessin, an enlightened patron of art, whose house, as that of the Swedish Ambassador, was for long a social centre in Paris, had this epitaph placed on his tomb, *Tandem felix*.

Galiani's theory of a cosmos based on boredom may seem only the mountebank conceit of a fancy that has slipped conventional fetters. All the same, the social world of the eighteenth century did to a great extent owe its origin to *ennui* or the flight from *ennui*. It is a world unfired by any sacred ideal that makes mankind kin. Long ago the living power of the Crown stiffened into ceremonial and formality, and the plight of the masses gets no farther than the antechambers of the great. People in this century are looking for a refuge in one another against themselves and their mediocrity. That out of a purely negative principle, flight from one's inner self, should be born the most delicately formal art, a delightful mode of social life, and a winged charm of *esprit*, remains the eternal glory of this most impersonal of centuries.

Daintily effeminate as the life Society leads are its reflections—in anecdotes, pullulating everywhere, shooting up weedlike none knows whence, roving from one lion of the day to another, like women's glances. An idle generation flutters like a choir of cherub-heads out of the smoke-foul taverns behind the chivalrous fans of *belles* who have lost the art of blushing, hides in the folds of their hooped skirts, slips after them into the purple dimness of the boudoir. The memoirs of the age, the only *romans* of the eighteenth century that are always readable, are, as it were, snapshots, carefully arranged with an eye to effect, and presented with graceful *émoi* to a public always eager to be told secrets. Letters, little hand-mirrors, exquisitely framed, in which each tiny expression of face and mind has been studiously posed, are passed on with a smile to friends for the general entertainment.

So are bodies and hearts. The devastating, passionate love that in a manlier age has often enough choked noble natures in blood and tears frightens this women's century. Here, if anywhere, woman's levelling, moderating influence has full play. Love is allowed to be no more than a Pygmalion-like enjoyment of bodily and mental charm, spiced by the thought of having robbed one's rival of that same satisfaction. This pleasure must be safely and prudently led up to: "Le plaisir est comme une fleur dont l'odeur est délicate et qu'il faut sentir légèrement."<sup>1</sup> That, however, is the sole restriction, for it is the whole century crying out for pleasure at all costs when the Prince de Ligne naïvely confesses, at his first sight of the bewilderingly rich flood of Parisian life, "J'ai peur de ne pas avoir assez de plaisir avant de mourir." Any sighs for a deeper, inward happiness are drowned in a cry of feverish gaiety: "Il n'y a pas de plus grande folie que d'être malheureux." Caylus, Duclos, Buffon even seek in hard work the necessary stimulus to disgusting bacchanalia. Thus the *plaisir* of the eighteenth century becomes a grim jesting on the scaffold, and the apparent ease of mind with which many of the chief actors made their exit from the stage has the air of a carefully studied final effect. That Mme Geoffrin was fond of saying, with a smile, "On ne meurt jamais que de bêtise," that so many poets and artists of the time took a last farewell of their friends with *un bon mot à la mode de Rabelais*, is not the sign of life lived to the full, in which even *in articulo mortis* pleasures hitherto unsampled beckon from existence's unexplored possibilities. If one is convinced that beyond the great curtain there is nothing, then the whole art of life culminates in a graceful arrangement of the folds behind one.

In her *Histoire de ma vie* George Sand has painted a loving miniature of her grandfather, Dupin de Francueil, which develops almost into a panegyric of the *ancien régime*. It was the Revolution, the old man declares, that first brought old age into the world. Until then people were young even at the hour of death. They were exquisite, cultivated, charming, roguish, amiable, elegant, always in high spirits. All knew a thousand capricious ways of enhancing life's delights. Music and singing were varied by happy hours at the architect's drawing-board; one planned the coquettish furnishing of rooms in which the comedies of love and life would

<sup>1</sup> Laborde, *Pensées*.

## WOMAN AND ROCOCO IN FRANCE

be played ; men baked poetic *pâtisseries*, turned their pipe on the lathe, competed with the ladies in embroidering. That in this way a fortune trickled through their fingers did not ruffle their Arcadian serenity. “ Nous nous ruinâmes le plus aimablement du monde.” Pain and pleasure were hidden behind powder and rouge. People scarcely let their troubles come to their own, much less to another’s, notice. And if at last one must die, let it be at the play, or at a ball, instead of in bed surrounded by four candles and horrible men in black. “ On savait vivre et mourir dans ce temps-là.”

This effeminately mediocre manner of living, open to every one with money and void of all great passions and noble pleasures, is the secret of the international character of France’s aristocratic culture in the eighteenth century. The channel of this influence was polite conversation, that delicately proportioned work of art of which Galiani says, “ C’est l’art de tout dire sans être mis à la Bastille, dans un pays où il est défendu de rien dire ”—a perfect round, polished by centuries of social practice, which became a password among the intellectual of all nations in those times. This influence embodied itself also in scrupulously weighed, smoothly persuasive writings ; and, with these feminine weapons, eighteenth-century France, in spite of all the defeats sustained by her armies, immeasurably extended her spiritual frontiers. Paris is no longer what Duclos calls it, *le vampire du royaume* : it is the spiritual vampire of Europe.





## A MANLY WITNESS OF THIS MOST FEMININE OF EPOCHS: DUCLOS AS AUTHOR AND MAN



Now there are objections to taking as the typical man of this period (so great in sum, so petty in detail) Voltaire, who has imprisoned the brilliance of his century at all events in one or two crystals that he presents with a smile to later generations; or Rousseau, for he urges his small but swiftly growing band of followers out beyond their century into the future; or Diderot, whom even to-day we feel passionately alive in our midst. The spirit of the age seems to have put on fairest flesh and inmost soul in Falconet's *Baigneuse*, and to seek release from things of earth in the winged dances of La Camargo—but these two are outside time, and therefore not, without reservations, typical of their century.

The true representative of this little-great world is Duclos, whose life fell completely within the century, and spiritually also did not go beyond its rationalistic bounds; who had a respectable literary talent, ordinary in the form it took, and yet of far-reaching influence at least on his own generation; who was an interested witness of all the big and little events that rippled and rushed past him; but above all, and distinctively, who was a man that with a firm hand suppressed in himself the womanish neurosis of his time, and went through life erect, though supple. Here, if anywhere, we have an adequate, but at the same time restrained, expression of the aspirations and potentialities of the age.

Duclos shows himself in his writings to be a thoroughly pliant opportunist, and he exploited to the utmost the gift a good fairy laid in his cradle—that of being born at the right moment. Those

culturally and artistically quite toneless first ten years of Louis XV's reign, the proper soil for the growth of medium talents, are the time of his rise to notice. In his chief work, the *Considérations sur les mœurs de ce siècle* (1751), which, after *L'Esprit des lois* and Rousseau's fiery tirades against civilization, makes its appearance quietly and with dignity, though apparently belatedly, he distils the feelings of his period in numerous definitive formulas, and deep and lasting success proves that the moment was chosen with sure instinct. Instinct, also, made him realize from the very first the nature of his talent. Midway between the *grand écrivain*, whose fervour and visions mould the countenance of a generation, and the *homme de lettres*, the journalist, who plies his daily occupation with confessedly material aims, stands his flexible literary style. By gentle filing he produced an obedient instrument which enabled him, like his master Fontenelle, to treat the most diverse subjects with equal propriety. Lively imaginative power and infallible appraisal of the face-value of things, a style that flashes in every facet of *esprit* (though it does often degenerate into a cold orgy of antithesis), assure him of a wide audience, especially among women, as also does his want of the depth that comes of patient care. Like Buffon and Rousseau, Duclos came late to literature; but not to shape into burning visions the broodings of years. Rather, it was almost as though forced to fulfil the promises his sparkling social gifts had seemed to make to his friends. None of his books bear signs of that suppressed but mastering passion, that spiritual necessity, out of which great works are born. Still, to his contemporaries he was a great man. Bachaumont may deplore his reputation as undeserved, Fontanes may pronounce him utterly void of sentiment and fancy; but those are isolated opinions. A whole chorus of contemporary references unites to sing his praises. Grimm, in a letter written in his younger days, ranks him near Buffon, Diderot, and d'Alembert; the Comte de Ségur speaks of the living influence of Duclos's writings on the Society of that time; La Harpe even, in his ode *L'Ombre de Duclos*, crowns him as a sort of literary Minos in Hades. Wealth also, and glittering honours, rewarded his activities as a writer. By the favour of Society he soon gained entrance into the highest circles; as secretary of the Académie and Historiographer Royal he filled for dozens of years the most influential offices in the republic of letters; and, like Buffon and Voltaire, he made a

considerable fortune by his pen. Nevertheless, perhaps for the very reason that he is so bound up with his period, he shares at the hands of posterity the same fate as, for instance, Marivaux. The Abbé Sabatier is the first to sound his unmistakable knell, and our own age brackets him with illustrious writers like Guez de Balzac, Fontenelle, and d'Alembert, whose names every educated person must be familiar with and whose works grow mildewed in libraries.

Nowhere does Duclos more sharply show himself mediocre and compromising like his century than in his historical writing. His place comes between patient fact-collectors like the Abbé Legrand, whose notes he used for his *Histoire de Louis XI*, and master-spirits such as Saint-Simon, through whose vision and love their age assumes a compelling unity. He differs from Montesquieu in that for him, the historian of manners, environment trespasses upon life only anecdotally, not in organic reciprocity; in contrast to the rhetorical history of Voltaire, in which facts are coloured to fit the style, he presents an absolutely true picture of people and events as they slip by. Truthfulness for Duclos means laying bare the bodies and souls of history's chief actors in an easy, casual stream of anecdotes. "Ce que je me propose d'écrire, c'est l'histoire des hommes et des mœurs. . . . L'histoire de l'humanité intéresse dans tous les temps, parce que les hommes sont toujours les mêmes." Hence his impishly inquisitive peeping into the *déshabillé* of his characters, the pleasant ease with which he wraps great historical events in a veil of entertaining stories, his masterly skill in getting great people to talk to him freely: "J'ai connu personnellement la plupart de ceux dont j'aurai à parler. J'ai vécu avec plusieurs d'entre eux, et n'ayant jamais joué de rôle, je puis juger des acteurs." In this way he hopes to get down to the springs of all that happens more surely than by earnest attempts to follow obscure historical rules. It cannot be denied that this purely human method has made him admirably impartial toward events. In, for instance, Louis XIV's grant of pensions to foreign *savants* he makes bold to find only the publicity expenditure of an egotist who seeks to become famous, and he turns away in disgust from Mélaç's pillage of the Palatinate in 1689. Indeed, it is his boast to have described facts so dispassionately that from them the reader can piece together his own picture.

These merits hold good, however, almost only for his contemporary work, the *Mémoires secrets sur les règnes de Louis XIV et de Louis XV*. The book to which, during his lifetime, he owed his reputation as an historian, as well as his post of *historiographe de France*, the *Histoire de Louis XI*,<sup>1</sup> is the bespoke work of a man determined to make his way. It is dedicated to the Minister Maurepas, who handed over to the writer the material collected by the industrious Abbé Legrand. The treatment is smooth and colourless, only occasionally drawing attention to itself. Sainte-Beuve points out how Duclos, in trying to produce a charming Society book, has refined and rendered elegant all the Baroque details of his subject, killed artistic freedom of exposition, and made the inconceivably varied life of the lordliest of kings a mere peg for his epigrammatically dry *esprit*. The devoted care with which great ladies, notably Mme de Rochefort, the Countess Forcalquier, La Pompadour, watched over Duclos's budding fame is explained by that literary polish and absurd censoriousness; Voltaire's amused homage to the modern "Sallust" is more to the *protégé* of Mme de Pompadour; and the Chancellor d'Aguesseau, who knew Legrand's work, has said the final word when he remarks of Duclos, "On voit bien qu'il ne sait tout cela que d'hier." So, on the whole, this book merely deepens our regret that Montesquieu's handling of the same life has not come down to us.

The writer's full gifts, however, are brought into effective play with the *Mémoires secrets*, published in 1791 by Sautreau de Marsy. In this work Duclos, as a contemporary observer, traces with an often gloomy, and always satirical, eye the setting of the 'great' Louis, the Regency of Philip of Orléans, the early years of the boy Louis XV, and the beginning of the Seven Years War. The idea of publishing this mosaic of lightning portraits seems hardly to have entered the head of Duclos, the intimate of La Pompadour. Hence that careless ease and abandon of anecdotal tone, that profusion of unflattering pictures of contemporaries, in the drawing of which not even his model and guide, Saint-Simon, was always a restrictive influence, that secret melancholy of an independent mind forced to see the world a dupe of ignorance and superstition. In spite of the criticisms of Sainte-Beuve and Michelet (the latter would dismiss Duclos as quite worthless for

<sup>1</sup> 1745.

an historical source), the vitality of this kind of self-confession seems to be established for all time.

Similarly untouched by all the joys and sorrows of the true *savant* are Duclos's learned activities. He would never have been content with a doubtful celebrity, ill-health, and the renunciation of all life's pleasures—which, according to Montesquieu, is the lot of the passionate seeker after knowledge. Still, he does take refuge from the paralysing monotony of everyday life in the self-oblivion of hard work. His linguistic studies—the editing of Lancelot and Arnauld's *Grammaire générale* in 1754, his collaboration in the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie* in 1762—serve to establish his importance as an Academician. In the reprint above mentioned, which he copiously enriched by careful notes, he joined the rationalizing grammarians, such as Arnauld, Volney, Tracy, who were doing their level best to purify the language—which in their eyes ought to be the product of a *grande idée* and hard logical thinking—of all the Baroque excrescences that sentiment, artistic freedom of the national spirit, and the hap of ages had added to it. To mention only one application of this principle, Duclos suggests the reduction of the complicated spelling of his period to one or two simple types. In this he is not the first in his century, since, for instance, both the Abbé de Saint-Pierre and Voltaire have anticipated him; nor the last, for right at the end of the period Restif de la Bretonne, with his *Glossographe*, will deal with the feminine capriciousness of writing. It was the utter failure of even his modest demand that double consonants should, where the pronunciation allowed, be written only once or replaced by accents (*lètre, remètre, cèle*) that knocked the bottom out of those same convictions of Duclos and his school about the logical structure of speech. In a like spirit the *Dictionnaire* of 1762 was worked at.

With a couple of studies on the Roman theatre and the distribution of parts on the stage Duclos requites the incredible favour of the people who in 1739 had introduced him into the Académie des Inscriptions before anything from his pen had appeared in print. These *études*, together with numerous classical reminiscences in his other works, bear witness to the interest with which from youth onward the author strolled through the literature of antiquity, not lingering even over profound beauties and without first-hand acquaintance, above all, with Homer. To the superiorly



amused interest of the time in the puerilities of the Middle Ages we owe a *Mémoire sur les jugements de Dieu*, which cautiously feels its way through one of the most hopeless aberrations of the human spirit. And, finally, the venture of tackling the Celtic language and the religion of the Druids is justified by the strong love Duclos bore his native Brittany, and therefore has its appeal for us even to-day.

Still more than his learned writings, Duclos's *romans* are a thank-offering to the distinguished society that opened its arms to the brilliant chatterer. Here also there is no remarkable originality; just a flexible treatment of a literary *genre* that had caught the public taste. The art of prose tales—introduced with *éclat* into France at the beginning of the century, from a most exotic *milieu*, through Galland's edition of *Les Mille et une Nuits*, lavishly tintured with moral vinegar in the periodicals of Steele and Addison, wittily parodied by Hamilton, enriched by transformation into character-sketches by the exact social observation of Lesage, Marivaux, Montesquieu—soon puts forth unhealthy blossoms in the satirical description of manners and the lax hedonism of Crébillon *filz*. La Morlière (*Angola*) and Diderot (*Bijoux indiscrets*) make libertinism the transparent cloak for literary, political, and philosophical convictions; Voltaire breathes his pity for mankind and the world into one or two *coquette* masterpieces rich in cosmic humour—his only creations of fragile beauty that will perhaps outlast all ages. Finally, Marmontel with his broken-winged inventions thinks to conclude and crown this Gallically variegated development; in deliberate contrast to the short-petticoated Muse of Laclos and Louvet, who then and still thumbs a mocking nose at his Mrs Grundy morals. Now in this long line full of rich diversity Duclos takes again an intermediate place. For his rather too solid imagination he borrows wings from the fantasticality of his Oriental and French models, and, like them, he pursues his characters even into the darkest corners. But never (except in *Madame de Luz*) does he go out of his way to keep the interest up by prurient pictures of unpleasant situations; and he is perhaps the only representative of this unequivocally bawdy school with whom the avowed aim of painting vice to reform it was not just a pretence.

Fréron's silly suggestion, based on the literary circumstances of the time, that Duclos did not write his *romans* himself has been

disposed of once and for all by Sainte-Beuve. Style and structure, mode of presentation, and sharpness of observation point unmistakably to Duclos: not less the all-too-frequent deadly soullessness of the people drawn with such meticulous art. The general impression is one of crushing *ennui*, which has killed any effective interest for posterity.

The themes, however, are often worth notice. Thus, for example, the problem of the *Histoire de Madame de Luz* (1741), a story of the Court of Henri IV, belonging to the family of Crébillon *filz*, Marivaux, Richardson, de Sade. A woman of high virtue, married without love, repulses the playmate of her youth, but is thrice laid low: in a Monna Vanna scene, where the wife yields her body to save her indifferent spouse; by the lust of a disdained suitor, who ravishes her in the bath; and finally in a drugged sleep, reminiscent of Richardson, where she falls victim to a new Tartuffe. The theme of the woman's utter unresistance to fate is developed with cold cynicism, with a heartlessness that raised storms in Parisian Society for and against the book when it appeared, and inspired the Marquis de Sade to write *Justine*; the costume, early seventeenth century, only scantily hides the nakedness of moral views from the mid-eighteenth, which are expressed with a profound pessimism—expressed, that is, in the author's reflections, for the figures in the novel are unreal and impersonal, the background remains shadowy, and of the situations only the suggestive ones are painted in pale flesh-tint.

Less anæmic, because drawn from personal observation, two peep-show pictures of society in those days present themselves for our examination, *Les Confessions du Comte de \*\*\** (1742) and the *Mémoires pour servir de suite aux " Considérations sur les mœurs de ce siècle "* (1751).

The former *roman*, a blend of tale of adventures, psychological study, and treatise on manners, pilots the hero (possibly the Duc de Richelieu) through episodes of gallantry with ladies of widely differing countries and condition, and tries in this way to form a universal estimate of sexual love, as Stendhal does later in *De l'Amour*. On this thin thread of invention are strung several cabinet-pieces of social characterization that never fail to repay study; for instance, the portrait, touched with the ardour of a Spanish *nouvelle*, of Doña Antonia, of Toledo; the gentle, gradual worming into the life of the pietistic Mme de Grémonville; a

short trip into the land of *bourgeois* love with the vivacious Mme Pichon; the cold-flamed *liaison* with an Englishwoman, who expiates her imperious passion by death; a snapshot, lit by the lightning of sarcasm, of the *bel esprit* coterie in the *salon* of Mme de Tonins (probably de Tencin); the story of an infatuation after the style of the Charpillon episode in Casanova; and, last of all, the figure of the wise woman who raises man to purity, Mme de Selves.

The search for the originals of the portraits here presented explains a good deal of the then unparalleled success of Duclos's *roman*: as it does also that of the *Mémoires sur les mœurs*, the feminine complement of his social *critique*, the *Considérations*. With the same technique as, at the end of the century, was almost done to death by Restif, the writer carefully picks out, as from a cabinet of rarities, separate types of women in contemporary society, and places them before the reader. Again we have a cobweb-thin thread of plot, though here it is in the hands of a noble lady, Mme de Canaples, who finally uses it to tie up the hero's happiness with that of a delightful girl, Mlle de Foix. Within this framework are enclosed subtle resolution of emotions into *raisonnement*, passionless description of passion, figures colourless as thought. Again, however, as before, the reader encounters one or two little masterpieces of observation and descriptive artifice. The angel-handsome hero is piloted, with careful heightening of passion, into the arms of the *grande amoureuse*, Mme de Canaples; a Mme de Retel reveals to him the nature of the contemporary love-psychosis; his successes among the ladies lead him to meditate upon the evolution of coxcombry, the development of the *petit maître*, and the social value of the *homme à la mode*; his triangular *affaire de cœur* with a Mme de Vergi gives him an insight into the conjugal morality of the age; and in his chaste affection for Mlle de Foix at last the power of true sentiment wins a complete victory over all the convention of vice.

Quite the product of the time, too, is the fairy-tale, *Acajou et Zirphile* (1744), characteristic in its peculiar mixture of tiresomeness and forcible wit, and in its origin in the circle of the Comte de Caylus: it is a sort of prose *bouts-rimés* for some Boucher prints that were meant for a never-published *opusculum* of the leisure hours of Count Tessin, the Swedish Ambassador. The La Fontain-esque problem *Comment l'esprit vient aux filles*, the Eden-tested education of women through love, does the cynic Duclos all honour;

just as the popular *conte de fée* framework gives full opportunity for satirical spotlights on contemporary follies. The characters of the lad Acajou and the stupid little Zirphile have a fairy-tale vagueness, but otherwise *esprit* has killed all the authentic tone and humour. In a bizarrely coarse preface the public is jeered at as being, like old Daddy Demos of Attic comedy, in its second childhood—a transparent move that naturally increased the success of the *jeu d'esprit* among professional critics (Desfontaines and Fréron) and ordinary readers. In 1759 Favart put it on the stage, at the Opéra, as *Les Têtes folles*. This little Sèvres figure of wit seems to have had its place of honour on the dressing-tables of the *cailles*; the little Argentine girl in Godard's *Thémidore* gives her charmingly naïve opinion on it; Diderot ranks it among the most graceful works of erotic literature of all periods, and in the eighties of the century Acajou is reported to have been still busy zealously giving young girls their first lessons in love.

The appearance on the boards in 1743 of the ballet *Les Caractères de la folie*—in verse, which in Duclos's own words is simply spoiling good prose—is not a social inconsistency, such as was occasionally committed by his master, Fontenelle. Duclos had merely the very practical wish to get free admission into the Opéra for life. With the inspiration that Rousseau got from the first scene for his *Devin de village*, therefore, the literary importance of this trifle is exhausted; the performances, with Bury's music, soon sent into the sleep of boredom this boredom-fleeing society.

A serious scientific, as it were, treatise on society confronts us in *Considérations sur les mœurs de ce siècle* (1750). An experience of life covering almost fifty years ("J'ai vécu," says the preface self-consciously) is here elaborated into the most delicate lacework of reflections, sewn together with fine stitches and neatly spread before the reader. We find no austerity and timeless beauty, as in Pascal and La Rochefoucauld; no flesh-and-blood types, as in La Bruyère; but sheer humanity and goodness of heart, as in Vauvenargues. It is the spiritual account-book of a man who feels the end of a period approaching and must let himself and others see where things stand, in sharp-cut ideas and without self-deception, clearly and painstakingly, as he has done in masterly fashion with the daily accounts. In spite of the fact that the stir caused in the world of letters by *L'Esprit des lois* and Rousseau's challenges to civilization had not yet died down, this

last and manliest study of the polished Rococo society made a deep and lasting impression. It is true that Voltaire, in whose judgments there always lurks a grain of jealousy, calls the book simply *l'ouvrage d'un honnête homme*; Montesquieu, however, puts Duclos above La Bruyère in philosophic penetration; the immediate future, at all events, did not endorse Grimm's verdict that the book came out about fifty years too late; and the Prince de Ligne confirms the view that Duclos is one of the most distinguished men of intellect France has produced—within a very narrow field of activity, of course: "Il ne s'est pas beaucoup exposé, son genre n'est pas le plus difficile, et il n'en avait qu'un." Sainte-Beuve, lastly, who is thoroughly entangled in a net of prejudice against Duclos from reading the memoirs of Mme d'Épinay, merely underlines the estimate of Duclos's rival and enemy, Grimm.

The same kind of dispassionate analysis of social problems, quite empty of artistic thrill and prophetic dismay at the sight of a fallen civilization, is brought by the author to his *Voyage en Italie* (published in 1791), but here not even this calm spectator has always been able to escape the potency of direct experience.

Grimm would fain lay the rival whose place he took in Mme d'Épinay's affections among the dead, even as a writer; and he sneers, "Quand on a le cœur froid et le goût gâté, il ne faut écrire ni sur les mœurs ni sur les arts." The accusation of defective taste is unjust, for if ever a writer fashioned for himself in his language a perfect instrument on which to display the whole compass of his talent it was Duclos. Buffon's "Le style c'est l'homme même" applies especially to this Breton who so shrewdly criticizes his age. And here in some degree Duclos is not of his time. In him there is none of that straining after femininely graceful expression that so often prevents the *littérateurs* of this century from pushing their whole thought to its conclusion like men (for instance, Fontenelle's "De mémoire de rose on n'a vu mourir un jardinier"); and none of that lack of character found, for all their verbal artifice, in the second-rate writers of the post-classical period. Often dry and harsh like the clash of swords on the fencing-floor where in youth he paced as expert, always sword-sharp, his antithetic style matches idea with idea, and pursues the finest niceties of thought often to the limits of the conceivable. At times, indeed, the web of ideas and words catches the reader's mind as in a net, and he

has trouble in freeing himself: "La probité est la vertu des pauvres; la vertu doit être la probité des riches." "Je vous voyais remplacer les sentiments par des procédés d'autant plus cruels qu'ils interdisent les plaintes, dont ils sont les motifs les plus amers." Or the character-study, sparkling from a thousand facets, of Père Tellier in the *Mémoires secrets*. If, as Marivaux says, style has sex Duclos's is masculine.

No wonder this invariably consistent thinker refused, like Montesquieu and Buffon, to have his *esprit* cramped for elbow-room by verse! The winged word, "Cela est beau comme de la prose," sailed down from the circle of La Motte and Fontenelle, by way of all the foes of rhyme, to Duclos; and the stiff-shanked verses of the ballet *Les Caractères de la folie* owe their existence, as has been noted, to the ambition to triumph over difficulty, and the hope of material benefit from them.

Thus Duclos stands in indifferent opposition to the really typical form in literature; carelessly he let himself be borne along by his period, artistic to the finger-tips, and his entire lack of feeling for tragedy and music shocked even his contemporaries. His *Considérations sur le goût* gives us accordingly, in contrast with Voltaire's, Montesquieu's, and d'Alembert's treatment of the same subject, an historico-ethical, rather than æsthetic, view. However, this mathematically, as it would seem, *spirituel* thinker followed as it were immanently subtle artistic laws of composition. To his gift for detecting *nuances* we owe several choice specimens of finished characterization (*cf.* the *romans* already mentioned, or, taken at random from the *Mémoires secrets*, the portrait of the Duchesse du Maine, the grotesque of the Tsar Peter's visit to the Court of Versailles, the Sallust-simple, pithy "Dégradation des Bâtards," the psychological medallions of Cardinals de Mailly and Dubois, etc.). To this *penchant* for limning finished portraits in the miniaturist's manner, so typical of his century, is due his want of skill in composition on a big scale, the raree-show technique of his *romans*, the frittering of great historical events into anecdotes. And round the careless sequence of little pictures the pointed, antithetical style twines the Rococo tendrils of its periods.

Duclos the writer, then, is almost wholly the child of his century. Quite otherwise, and attractive even at this distance, is Duclos the man. One can place over this character no better

motto than Le Goffic chose for his *Amour breton*—*Totus in antithesi*. Duclos is Breton from head to heel; so much so that his entire life, success and failure, can be explained by his origin. And withal he remains the ice-smooth courtier. Thus in him, as in the whole century, slumbers the mighty spirit of the people, held down only by the weight of levelling centralism. He is an isolated phenomenon worthy of the closest consideration; for neither, let us say, Diderot, Marmontel, nor even Piron, though in other respects their lives run so parallel to his, can be put in quite the same class as Duclos, since to them Paris becomes, without any reservation, a second home. Only Latour, perhaps, lends himself to comparison, though, indeed, he pushed his Picard obstinacy to almost insane extremes.

In Duclos, therefore, pulses and surges up at times the ancient Breton blood. Unstable and eternally changing, eternally the same, too, like the Breton sea, are the people who struggle with it. Full of mystery also, like the forest-darkened legends of Merlin and King Arthur's Table Round. Michelet says:

Cette race, rêveuse, mystique, capable d'élans admirables, impropre à l'action continue, imaginative et spirituelle, et n'en aimant pas moins l'absurde, l'impossible, les causes perdues, si cette race perd en une foule de choses, une lui reste, la plus rare, c'est le caractère.

And this Breton blood has worked wonders all down the centuries. In the war of the Veneti against Cæsar it drives its noblest to the Roman shambles; in Bertrand du Guesclin (fourteenth century) it rises against the English, the hereditary foes of the Breton soil; it lures on a Jacques Cartier to the discovery of Canada; men like Duguay-Trouin in the eighteenth century, Robert Surcouf in the nineteenth century, become, under the same impulse, relentless spirits of revenge in the sea warfare against England. The same Breton boldness rises in Cadoudal as he leads his Chouans into the field against the Revolution's centralizing policy, and brings to the tip of Cambronne's tongue at that dark hour the liberating word with its world of meaning. Breton-fashion are Lesage's dogged mutiny against the society of his day, and the literary wars of Fréron and Maupertuis against Voltaire; as also is Lamettrie's exaggerated rationalism. The sceptical faith of Chateaubriand, Lamennais, and Renan flows from this source, as well as the ardent love of their native heath shown by Brizeux and Souvestre. And, finally, in the *sentiment régional* of, for example,

I.e Goffic and the Bard of Dinan, Théodore Botrel, the same forces are inspirational and effective.

They are secretly, but only seldom openly, so in Duclos. With what loving care, in his *Mémoires sur les Druides* and *Sur l'origine et les révolutions des langues celtique et française*, he goes on the trail of Celtic primitive times—a bold piece of pioneer work in those days! Amid the brilliance of the Court and astonishing literary success his native Dinan was never out of mind. Thither he flees when he wishes to take a rest from his oppressive Academic duties and the stress of life in the capital. If he hears of a compatriot undeservedly fallen on evil days he tries, with the notorious clannishness of all good Bretons, to give him a helping hand. For years he looked after the welfare of Dinan as its mayor, and two of the loveliest avenues along the old town walls are reminders of his official activity. As a member of the Assembly he served his people by word and deed, even at the risk of his own position and freedom; and only the fact that his last illness took him unawares prevented him from going to die in his native place. All this was without parochialism, for hardly another author in this society of world-wide ideals is at the same time so distinctively French.

Then his affection for his mother, strong and purifying like that of Pope, Caylus, and Chateaubriand for theirs. In the stream of polished periods in his autobiography occur one or two passages that quiver with soft emotion and pull us up with surprise. He is speaking of his mother, that upright lady who kept her youthful light-heartedness and undiminished energy even in her hundred-and-second year. And, again, his emotion rises to a noble anger in those letters from Italy in which he clenches his fists against his Paris enemies, who have deprived him of the consolation of standing by the deathbed of this, the only person he ever loved. Here Nature imperiously asserts her rights in return for all the wrongs the old bachelor, as son of his century, had done to woman in his writings and life.

Breton and manly in Duclos is an ineffaceable basis of religious feeling. True, in his anger against the sect of the Convulsionnaires, who had dragged his honoured Jansenism into the slime of eroto-religious frenzy, he calls them *canaille*; pitilessly he strips the religious drapery from the naked fanaticism of the Jesuit Tellier, and complete indifference is in his opinion the most effective



public weapon against the pose of martyrdom. But he is just as incisive in holding up freethinkers of the Maréchal Richelieu type to contempt; and, let officious friends noise it abroad that on his death-bed Duclos greeted Père Chapeau, "Je suis venu au monde sans culotte, je puis bien m'en aller sans chapeau," it is none the less true that he never made common cause with the iconoclasm of the Encyclopædists; and his famous remark, "Ils finiront par m'envoyer à confesse," is not merely characteristic of the astute courtier.

Then we may note the extraordinary antithesis of peasant obstinacy (*paysan du Danube*, the de Goncourts call him) and suppleness; most closely united in his notorious *franchise*. There are quite enough contemporary references to show that in the lightly treading, courteous culture of the eighteenth century frank expression of character was felt to be something alien. For Mme du Deffand outspokenness is *une nudité*; indeed, the Prince de Ligne mistrustfully shuns people who make a pose of bluntness, and finds "que le résultat est une flatterie plus dégoûtante que celle des flatteurs ordinaires." That, though, is the sentiment of privileged members of a society hermetically sealed from inside, the portals of which every newcomer must open by force. Duclos is *homo novus*, and even in youth he realized that talent and tenacity alone, without very obvious tokens of birth, could effect an entry here only slowly, if at all. Moreover, there was his cross-grained and independent Breton instinct, which in the middle of a tight-knit social tradition would have been condemned to impotence. Hence from the very first he wears this mask before his scoffer's face, and never lays it aside until his death. "Un travers qu'on possède seul, fait plus d'honneur qu'un mérite que l'on partage avec quelqu'un."<sup>1</sup>

Only too soon, accordingly, did this warfare-weary society come to terms with such a strongly marked character. Even Galiani makes only the pin-prick thrust, "Pour Duclos, son avis indique toujours quel est l'avis contraire du reste de l'univers. Ainsi tout va bien." Woe to the hapless wight who conjures up the tyrant's ire in public challenge. He has pronounced his own doom like that Abbé de Caveyrac whom Duclos turned out of the house of the Ambassador Kaunitz at Naples. Even with the subsequent Minister Calonne, who did not bring his busy hands away precisely

<sup>1</sup> Crébillon *fil.*

spotless from the La Chalotais trial, the Breton Duclos refuses to sit at the same table. By the side of such audacity we can put only Lesage's defiance of the money-magnates of his time, or Latour's divine insolence toward the *talons rouges* and *caillettes* of the Versailles Court, who squirm long hours before him on the rack of his models' throne. The careful prudence, nevertheless, with which Duclos the *frondeur* shaped his destiny becomes clear to the observer if he compares the ice-smooth man-about-Court with Rousseau, an uncouth fellow who fought with his heart. In both men there is the same incisive criticism of existing institutions, the same desire for reform, the same bold defence of what is seen to be right. But while Rousseau goes to hide his all-too-often indifferently acted sorrow in garrets and among lackeys, whither the dainty little feet of even his most devout admirers hesitate to follow, Duclos tosses his *Foutu!* into the bepowdered company with all a courtier's impeccable demeanour, tries to force his strict orthography on to the delicate fingers of the sex, makes an elegant gesture of the sharp dig in the ribs he gives the public in the preface to *Acajou*: "On peut joindre beaucoup d'habilité à beaucoup de droiture." Let d'Alembert grimly reproach him for cheapening the fair name of the *philosophes*; the point is that in this indirect way he achieved what he intended—and not to the hurt of *philosophic*.

The case is similar with his position at Court. To his Breton perversity what a delight it must have been to pelt this troupe of marionettes with insults that could be taken as concealed compliments! He is allowed to do it and go scot-free, since Louis XV himself cut short some one who had come to tell tales with, "Duclos? Ah, celui-ci a son franc-parler." To be sure, only a loudly chuckling circle of intimate friends were permitted to know that he had bluntly called the Pompadour *régime* a *conocratie*. And yet it was La Pompadour who was the ladder to all his success. Only once did Duclos's Breton boldness get him into trouble—in the Parliamentary disturbances of 1764, at the heart of which was his unfortunate friend La Chalotais. Then there surges up in the canny student of mankind something of the elemental popular spirit that in the Revolution will burst all its chains; and, unbowed by the menaces of d'Aiguillon and Calonne, he goes into banishment to Italy.

For all his suppleness, for all the occasional equivocation of his

*franchise*, Duclos is a sturdy, upright character. *Honnête homme*, Louis XV and Voltaire call him. Rousseau, whose only friend he remained almost to the last, cannot deny him the testimonial of *droit et adroit*. Where the interests of the world of letters are at stake, or the honour of the Académie, to which he was secretary for long years, he had no respect even for royal princes: witness his refusal to accord special marks of honour to the Comte de Clermont at the latter's reception into the Forty. He jealously guards the approach to the sacred portals. "L'Académie ne donne pas l'extrême onction," he retorts to the candidate Bougainville, who advances his weak state of health as an argument for admission. And he stuck up like a man for Piron, even when the Court cut him for the notorious priapic ode. Not even the posthumous slanders of Grimm and Mme d'Épinay in the lady's *Mémoires et correspondance* (1818) have been able to tarnish his reputation permanently, except just for a moment in the eyes of Sainte-Beuve, who in subsequent essays cries his *pater peccavi*.

Duclos is Breton, finally, in his strong instinct of independence. He never, like, for example, Marmontel, sells his freedom of speech to the great, among whom he could not live except on a basis of equal give and take. And with resolute hand he transferred to earth what Rousseau wrote, as his philosophic ideal in life, in the clouds: "Ceux qui savent rendre leur situation non la plus éclatante, mais la plus indépendante, sont les plus près de toute la félicité."

Even in his capacity of *honnête homme* Duclos the man begins to be of his century. In addition to this, his social gifts make him well qualified to represent it. He has Buffon's fastidious attention to outward appearance; and this physical spruceness extends to his mental processes, to his pliant bearing and mien, and to his handwriting, dapper for all its masculinity. Like Fontenelle and Voltaire, this Breton *bourgeois* realized early what a Protean ally a considerable fortune can be in the fight for social importance, and with inimitable art he organized his family connexions, his official revenues, and the hospitality of his friends to this purpose. In contrast to Voltaire, however, he is strictly logical in seeing that his character, once established in Society, is kept up to the mark; and so he is spared Chamfort's bitter experience. "C'est un grand malheur de perdre, par notre caractère, les droits que nos talents nous donnent sur la société."

If ever a man made the most of his social talents it is Duclos. For all his intellectual mobility, he finds material pleasure in that atmosphere of *sainte paresse* wherein *bel esprit* good-fellowship best thrives. He flung away ambition, except of a moderate sort, and abjured all those smarts of love that play such havoc with the nerves. Hence his robust health, strong as steel to the last; hence, too, the smiling equanimity with which he arranges his contemporaries, the stuff of his observation, into his pattern of life. For all that, sometimes his charming amiability won him feminine friendships which lasted beyond the grave. It has to be admitted, however, that once his social reputation was secure he often, like all clever people, took liberties with *bon ton*, and several of his excursions into crude butchery are no doubt to be put down to his liking to feel his strength. Here, too, perhaps, has its source something of almost lackey-like unrefinement in his attitude, especially toward woman—a trait that, in his keyhole method of writing history, finds literary, and in his treatment of Mme d'Épinay, not very attractive, human expression.

Duclos's social reputation received incomparably effective help from his abundance of *esprit*. One can say without exaggeration, and without prejudice to Voltaire, that Duclos is the viceroy of *esprit* on earth. "De tous les hommes que je connais," says the mathematician d'Alembert, "Duclos est celui qui a le plus d'esprit dans un temps donné." And Duclos himself claims, "Mon talent à moi, c'est l'esprit." Coffee-house disputes had put an edge on his speech, and it is sword-bright and sword-sharp, like his style. Each conversation with him, even in a *salon* and in the society of ladies, becomes a duel. He pelts his opponent with a hail of witty and caustic sallies, entangles him in antitheses, bewilders him with a display of hair-splitting, and knocks the weapon from his hand with an anecdote—all in the most polished periods. And on top of that his expressive face, with its bright blue eyes, a lusty voice (*voix de gourdin*, says the Abbé Baudeau), and abrupt, almost dictatorial gestures. In this way he has at his command an unlimited range of tones, from which only one is missing—charm. "Sel ordinaire, sel de mer, à la vérité, sel amer," that beauty-lover, Ligne, called this epitome of *esprit*. One or two examples may be given. He scornfully remarks of an obsequious financier, "On lui crache au visage, on le lui essuie avec le pied, et il remercie." He declares that he plucks Sartines,

chief of the Paris police, from the foul mud of his activities *pour le pendre dans l'histoire*. The scandalous tittle-tattle he hears exchanged at table in Versailles makes him suppose he must be sitting among lackeys in the kitchens. "On croit entendre des valets qui s'entretiennent de ce que font leurs maîtres." No wonder his enemies, for the most part aristocratic nobodies, tried behind his back to get the *bavard impérieux*, the *plébéien révolté*, put out of the way, for they feared him *comme les voleurs craignent les réverbères*, and even Voltaire kept at a respectful distance. As for smaller men, such as d'Olivet, that *pauvre infâme* Voisenon, and the Abbé Trublet, they limp from the field of battle with bloody noses. This complete surrender to *esprit*, however, which constituted Duclos's fame among his contemporaries, became the tragedy of his life. "L'esprit est le premier des moyens; il sert à tout, et ne supplée presque à rien," he himself states in his *Considérations*. Elsewhere he condemns those writers who, instead of labouring with the file and producing work that would hand their names down to posterity, have been content to remain *hommes du monde*. It is his own fate, the doom of *médiocrité*. For the realization of life's happiness, the proper discharge of duty, and, above all, genuine talent scarcely leave much time for coining that small change of *esprit* that circulates in *société*.

In his last, most salient characteristic, too, in libertinism, this man is entirely the child of his epoch. The century of social surface-culture has not a moment to waste on serious introspection, and searchers of the heart such as Vauvenargues stand apart, freakish and despised. Rousseau had to come, to teach people the delights of solitude and to draw from men of the world avowals like Sénac's marvellous "Qui pourroit dire combien de siècles a vécu qui a beaucoup senti?" There is nothing of this sort in Duclos's earlier days. Then people have brains where their hearts should be, like Fontenelle; they permit themselves miniature emotions they can play pretty games with; verse is taboo, and tragic feeling left to ladies who flirt in the language of scented handkerchiefs. To speak about love one must be amoral, like the moralist Duclos. This bachelor son of Breton country stock does not know the entrancing bloom of shy-eyed maidenhood as Maurice Barrès<sup>1</sup> celebrates it in the young girls of Brittany; and the praises of *l'amour breton* sung in Renan's recollections of his youth,

<sup>1</sup> In *Sous l'œil des barbares*.

or by Loti in *Pêcheur d'Islande*, would only have won a smile from the sceptic. Only a shrug would have been evoked by that classic cry for fulfilled enjoyment of life that Diderot contrasts with the cold corruption of Rameau's nephew :

Je ne méprise pas les plaisirs des sens, j'ai un palais aussi, et il est flatté d'un mets délicat ou d'un vin délicieux ; j'ai un cœur et des yeux, et j'aime à voir une jolie femme, j'aime à sentir sous ma main la fermeté et la rondeur de sa gorge, à presser ses lèvres des miennes, à puiser la volupté dans ses regards, et à expirer dans ses bras. . . .

An ingenious wit has seen Duclos's emotional attitude toward woman in that anecdote from the *Chronique scandaleuse* where the impeccable *homme du monde* jumps, just as he is, from his bathe in the river Seine to help up a pretty woman who has fallen from her carriage into the mud on the bank, and stretches his hand out to her with a gracious smile, murmuring, " Pardonnez-moi de n'avoir pas de gants ! " Another scene shows us this representative of a whole culture seated at the table of the actress Quinault ; taking part in a sort of intellectual Black Mass, which culminates in the variation of Rousseau-Diderot-Saint-Lambert blasphemies, " Belle vertu qu'on attache le matin sur soi avec des épingles ! " And in his self-portrait he raises the veil with his own hand :

Je n'ai jamais travaillé sur moi-même, et je ne crois pas que j'y eusse réussi. J'ai été très libertin par force de tempérament, et je n'ai commencé à m'occuper formellement des lettres que rassasié de libertinage, à peu près comme ces femmes qui donnent à Dieu ce que le diable ne veut plus.

However, Buffon, Caylus, Piron are in the same case as Duclos here, and Rousseau loves childish innocence only because by it he can measure his own corruption. And even Duclos's fair patrons, Mme de Mirepoix and Mme de Rochefort, only give with a laugh their verdict, " Ah, pour vous, Duclos, du pain, du vin, et la première venue." But what can be more characteristic of Duclos's interpretation of life, as of Duclos's century, than that his critical study of society, the *Considérations*, leaves the heart out of account altogether ; nay, that in this women's century the word *femme* occurs only once in the pages of this same serious, moralizing work ?



**BOOK I**  
**SOCIETY**

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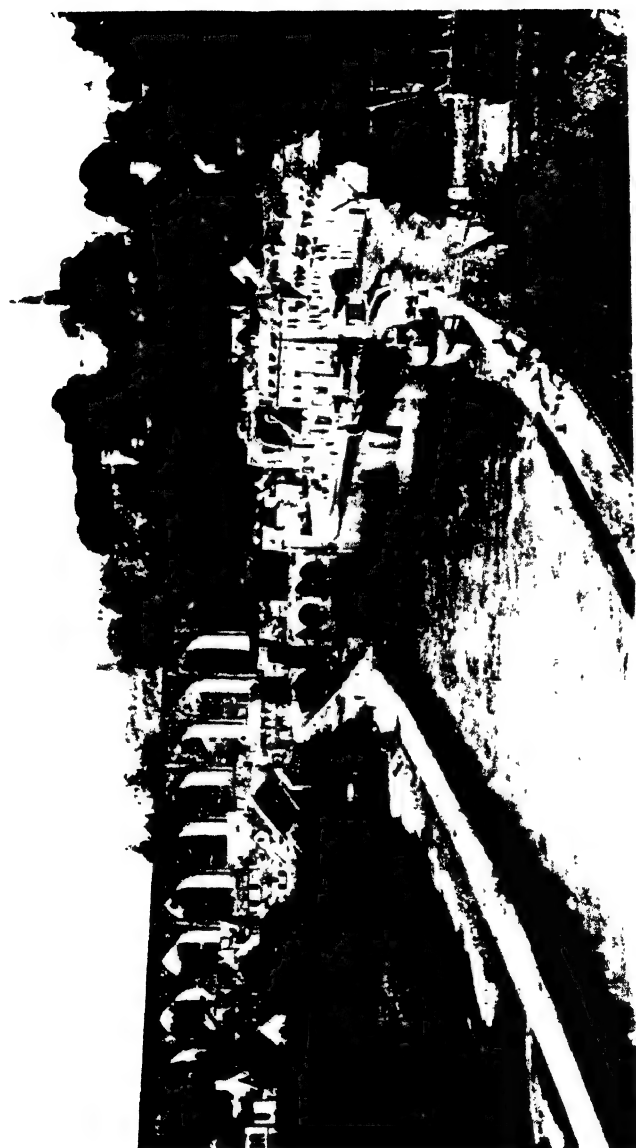
## FRENCH PROVINCIAL LIFE: DINAN EN BRETAGNE



As one approaches the town of Dinan from Rennes, *via* La Brohinière, the country on either side of the train no longer bears the typical stamp of Central Brittany—no freakishly rugged landscape, hardly anything of the secret magic of Breton forests, no wilderness of rocks, no dolmens and menhirs. Forest and hill and dale wear the smooth traces of man's laborious hand. In gentle undulations the green of pasture-land rolls away to the horizon, broken now and then by tree-clumps and files of fruit-trees; flocks of sheep with their half-wild shepherds flit past; a cluster of peasants' cottages disappears in a hollow; and from afar accompanies us awhile the slender church spire of some larger place—nothing to remind us that we are near the sea, nothing but the fine silvery mist that quivers in the pale sunlight and swathes countryside and men and animals in a damp veil. And so we arrive at Dinan. The station is indifferent, and not less boring is the Rue Thiers, where we put up at an hotel. A quick toilet here, then off we go to explore the past. A few hundred yards more of characterless modern buildings brings us on to the Place Duclos. The gloomy grey building opposite is the Mairie, where the town library is housed. To-morrow we shall ransack it for its scanty relics of Duclos, and compare his portrait in the *salle d'honneur* with the one Latour drew; to-day the home scenes of his life are our quest. We turn off immediately to the left, down the Grande Rue, which leads us past the church of Saint-Malo, coquettishly hidden behind green trees and lively with all the whimsicalities of Late Gothic, into the heart of old Dinan.

Round the Place des Cordeliers and down the Rue du Jerzual the beams of century-old houses jut, and the grey gables lean toward one another; the lattice windows show peeps of tiny gardens abloom with homely flowers; in the countless corners and along the gutters roll and scuffle dirty children; *corbeilles*, the gear of handicraft, and barrows lie idly about; cats and dogs wage Homeric combats—to-day as two hundred years ago. Regretfully we tear ourselves away from this scene of undisturbed sheer humanity and climb up to the right toward the Church of the Redeemer. We feast our eyes on the capricious harmony of its Romanesque, Gothic, and Baroque styles; pay our homage at his cenotaph in the dim interior to Du Guesclin's heroic heart; then on we go, past a threadbare Jardin Anglais, to the magnificent avenue of elms that sweeps up to the Tour Sainte-Catherine. With a cry of delight and surprise we ascend to the battlements. The panorama that unrolls itself below is without peer in Brittany—nay, in the whole of France—for bold grandeur and loveliness. To right and left, as far as eye can pierce the thick mantle of ivy, the mass of foliage, and the laughing bounty of flowers, the town extends its centuries-old ramparts along the river Rance. We are lost in contemplation, and instinctively there comes to mind a sentence from Souvestre's *Derniers Bretons*: "A voir Dinan avec son corset d'antiques murailles si crevassé de maisonnettes riantes, si brodé de jardins fleuris, on dirait une jeune fille essayant une vieille armure par-dessus sa robe de bal." Almost directly in front of us a viaduct crosses over in stone ponderousness to Lanvallay; beneath, the little river Rance, soon to become a sea-wide stream, presses through the arches; up the treed slopes lean old and cosy-looking little houses; the people at the water's edge seem from above like a swarm of ants; and there the *Du Guesclin* is already puffing away, all impatience to start for Saint-Malo. If the day were clearer we should be able to catch a glimpse of the old sea-dogs' town far over there, beckoning across to its land sister.

At last we shake off the spell and turn back toward the town. A quarter of an hour's easy saunter brings us past Saint-Sauveur, through the Rue de l'Horloge, where again little old houses crowd confidentially upon us, to the market-place; and a moment later we are in the Rue de la Ferronnerie, standing before the home of Duclos's childhood. A plain marble tablet overhead records the



DINAN IN BRETAGNE  
*Photo by the London Post*



fact on the wall of this peculiar-looking building, which is two floors high and two windows wide. On the left it breaks off abruptly, and has leaning against it a one-storey building, its upper floor receding from the line of houses. The total impression is one of semi-dilapidation, and even the emotional atmosphere is spoilt by a *café* on the street level. Here the spirit of the past loses its potency, and disenchanted we turn away. We pass rapidly through the Place du Champ, where Duclos used to romp half-wild and barefoot; the defiant statue of Du Guesclin by Frémiet remains on our left amid military ranks of trees, and we turn into the Château de la Duchesse Anne. A swarthy, scowling fellow, this; he wears round his ashlar brow a mighty wreath of battlements, and rears his bald crown to heaven. And as we follow the guide down deeply worn, winding stone steps to the dungeons, and up to the armoury and the Knights' Hall, there will come queerly to mind that here the beautiful duchess, future wife of Charles VIII of France, forced her tender limbs into this very space in the wall of the men's room, the Fauteuil de la Duchesse, for her pious meditations. The museum that struggles for place in the cramped and ill-lit rooms cannot detain us long, and we descend the Rue du Château and go through the massive Porte Saint-Louis to the old town-moats. On the right frowns a clump of ruinous towers luxuriant with green, and straight beneath the *château's* lowering brow and half-blind gaze stretches the superb avenue of the Promenade des Petits Fossés. Here we are in Duclos's own district. It was he who had these trees planted when he was Mayor of Dinan; here he used to stroll whenever the longing for peace and retirement had lured him from the turmoil of Paris back to his native town. Here, too, at the beginning of the steeply falling Rue du Fossé, ringed round by a semi-circle of century-old maples, his marble bust looks down from its high granite pedestal at the *promeneurs*. A few hundred yards further the avenue loses itself in the Place Duclos; we retrace our steps along the wide Rue Thiers and reach the Pall Mall. Here the little Duclos struck up a perilous friendship with some captive English naval officers; and now Englishmen and women in dubious travelling-costume stride across it on their way to the Grands Fossés. We follow them; again, in the coolness of the lofty maple arches, Duclos's spirit hovers round us. We sit down on a bench to take breath and collect our manifold impressions.

## WOMAN AND ROCOCO IN FRANCE

In front of us little French boys and English ones from the colony mingle in play; to the right the little towers and tracery of the church of Saint-Malo peep through the foliage and Saint-Sauveur gives us a friendly nod; and to the north, there where the Chemin de la Fontaine winds among laughing villas to the Dinan iron-baths, looms on the horizon a fragment of age-old forest, the sparse remains of that huge Forêt de Brocéliande which once upon a time covered the whole country from Dinan to Rennes, and round whose myth-shrouded virginal founts satyrs, nymphs, men, and animals flocked. Wherefore should not the Dinan iron-spring have been that Fontaine de Jouvence of the old legend?





## THE TOWN : PARIS UNDER THE REGENCY

**H**ERE then is the background against which Duclos's early youth unfolds itself. He himself has told us about it in that fragment of his autobiography which for almost childlike *insouciance* and charming *bon-homie* stands alone among his writings, though its entire lack of feeling for nature betrays the century before Rousseau, and beside, for instance, Chateaubriand's positive revelling in nostalgia it pales away into mere playfulness.

Je veux écrire les mémoires de ma vie. Ils seraient peu intéressants pour le public ; aussi n'est-ce pas au public que je les destine : mon dessein est de me rappeler quelques circonstances où je me suis trouvé, de les mettre en ordre et de me rendre à moi-même compte de ma conduite, et d'en amuser peut-être un jour quelques amis particuliers.

So we get a kind of confessions, richly garnished with anecdotes, in which the moralist peeps only now and then over the narrator's shoulder.

He first sees the light in that house in the Rue de la Ferronnerie, on February 12, 1704. His parents are solid, substantial *gens d'affaires*, who own a hat factory, a lot of land, and ironworks round about Dinan. His father, Michel-Pinot Duclos, the boy scarcely knew; his mother, Jeanne le Bigot, must have been a practical woman of the Mme Goethe type, energetic and good-hearted at the same time.

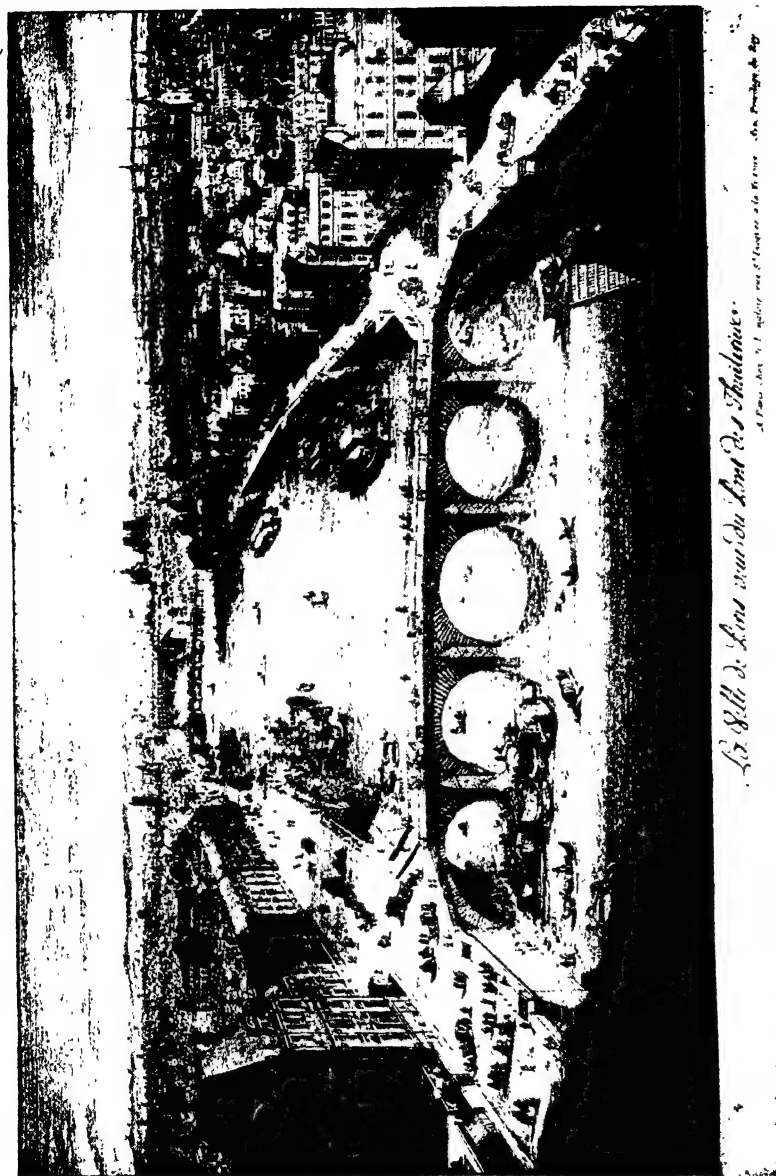
Ma mère réunissait des qualités qui vont rarement ensemble : avec un caractère singulièrement vif, une imagination brillante et gaie, elle avait un jugement prompt, juste et ferme. Voilà déjà une femme assez rare ; mais ce qui est peut-être sans exemple, elle a eu à cent ans passés, la tête qu'elle avait à quarante.

Accordingly without much hesitation, after her husband's early death, she rejects all suitors, even of noble rank, by pointing to her three children, and resolutely takes in hand the management



of the family fortune. But keen participation in the shipbuilding industry of Saint-Malo, which reaches its heyday during the War of the Spanish Succession through the privateering expeditions of Duguay-Trouin and his friends against England, soon distracts the busy woman from the education of her children. In 1709, against her will, Duclos's elder brother, his senior by eighteen years, enters a monastery: about the same time their twenty-two-year-old sister marries one Pellenec, a Government clerk in Rennes, and as Duclos grows older will lavishly saddle him with avuncular responsibilities. At the moment, however, young Charles is well on the way to becoming a street-urchin. During his mother's frequent absences on business he runs wild, like Chateaubriand later in Saint-Malo, barefoot and in ragged clothes, through the streets and squares of his native town. The strange, wild figures of the captive English naval officers, who could come out from the Château de la Duchesse and wander freely through the streets, must have had a particular fascination for him; for with one of them, a knight named Hamilton, he quickly strikes up a close friendship, sits on the old sea-dog's shoulder, and cannot contain himself for pride if he gets the chance of trotting along beside him on the Place du Champ under the eyes of the honest citizens. But this youthful bliss comes to a sudden end. One day the gruff old fellow cannot resist the temptation to initiate his young friend into the delights of English punch; and when in the evening he brings the little chap home tipsy and hands him over to his mother with a good-natured grin she takes the incident amiss. She forbids the Englishman her house, and with quick resolution packs the boy off to his sister in Rennes.

Now begins for the good-looking, precocious youngster a time of rather premature social pleasure. His sister pranks the young man in a fashionable coat, stockings, and buckle-shoes, and parades before her female friends and acquaintances with this living witness to her own youth. "*Quoiqu'elle fût jeune, un petit frère de six ans qu'on présente est un certificat de plus de la jeunesse de la sœur,*" is the satirical comment of the *connoisseur* of women. Everywhere the lad is taken gossips and cronies applaud his cleverness and wit and talk about his great future. Of course, he must have a tutor at once—one of those poor devils of obscure family "*qui, en montrant le latin, achevaient d'en apprendre autant qu'il leur fallait pour être prêtres.*" With the



*Le Pont des Tuileries.*

*à Paris, sous le 1. juillet 1848, l'empereur des Français, Napoléon III.*

PARIS FROM THE TUILERIES BRIDGE.



heedless truculence of youth the pupil very soon becomes one too many for his pedant, and still as he looks back in old age he leisurely and minutely plucks to bits the undeniable merits of this thankless profession; perhaps in theoretic vindication of that brutal scene at Mme d'Épinay's where Duclos, the Academician and celebrated moralist, covers the tutor Linant with ridicule in the hearing of his pupil and an astonished circle of intimate friends. There is not the slightest appreciation of how bitterly tragic this drudgery is to a man of spirit and refinement, as is exemplified, for instance, in the life of Reinhold Lenz.

For the full development of the young prodigy's talents, however, a richer soil was demanded, and daughter and acquaintances laid siege to Mme Duclos to persuade her to let the gifted boy go to Paris. But for maternal pride, and the envious amazement that would appear on the faces of the good townsfolk when for the first time in their lives they saw the son of a country *bourgeois* embrace a gentleman's career, provincial scruples and Breton caution would have prevailed against all argument. As it is, however, the sprightly youth of nine finds himself one morning stowed carefully into the stage-coach bound for the capital, "comme un paquet à remettre à son adresse." Here young Master Know-all is in his element. Some lively girls who are travelling with him nearly die of laughter at his clever remarks, and smother him with comfits and kisses; while from his snug corner a comfortable old *abbé* leans forward, with twinkling eyes, to praise the Creator in the creature, and salute the future doctor of the Sorbonne.

Il me trouvait déjà tant d'esprit, et en avait tant lui-même, qu'il prétendait que je serais un jour docteur de Sorbonne. Il aurait depuis bien rabattu de ses espérances.

Even a slight mishap at the end of the journey, when they reach the post-house in the Rue de la Harpe, cannot dash the youngster's spirits. A friend of the family, to whom Mme Duclos had promised the first charge of her jewel, is not there to meet him; and, forgotten for the moment, the young rascal dodges here and there among the baggage, slips round the steaming horses, and sneaks after the postillion into the stables. The man still feels the handshake, and the reward it conveyed, that went with the request to keep an eye on *le petit*; so when it is time to be going home he

makes a quick decision, and leads the little chap by the hand to the house of some decent tradespeople of his acquaintance who live near by. The dear little fellow comes to this good old couple like a gift from heaven, especially as not long before they had lost their only son. A supper is laid for him on a little table, inexhaustible as Snowwhite's, and with a good-night kiss from his hosts he climbs into bed as if into heaven. The following day also flies past in play and innocent mischief, like a fairy-tale, and it is with very mixed feelings that the prince follows his mentor when at nightfall the latter brings him back to reality. The whole of these scenes and the account of the impression they made on the boy's mind, together with the charming picture of *petit bourgeois* life in Paris, form a masterpiece of light-winged humour, and remind us distinctly of Chardin.

Thus the boy Duclos, like many before and after him, is greedily swallowed up by the monster Paris—"Paris ce vampire du royaume." He is completely enwrapped; and he will use up all his youthful strength, and his native town in Brittany will have to aid his struggles, before he can escape from those sweetly treacherous coils. To the boy and youth, however, Paris is only the fabled marvel, the place where men become demi-gods, a magic casket of intoxicating pleasures. "C'est dans Paris qu'il faut considérer le Français parce qu'il y est plus Français qu'ailleurs," affirms even the mature man, after a lifetime of experience. The youth's eyes are still sealed to the grim reverse of this fairness, the lives that many must spend in the shadows so that a few may live in the light, the senseless tyranny of luxury in Paris, where one "can lunch for thirty sous; four francs won't do more than whet the appetite; you must have a hundred louis for the indispensable amount of the superfluous, and 400 louis to be sure of a superfluous amount of life's necessities."<sup>1</sup> And the "Parisian dirt" Walpole speaks of, that shameful filth which makes Rousseau, too, and the Prince de Ligne hold their noses—Duclos never once saw it. Much less would he, who knew nothing of love, have agreed with Chamfort's resigned sigh that Paris is the place "où il pue, et où l'on n'aime point."

On the day after his arrival, however, Duty, "stern daughter of the voice of God," thrusts herself between Duclos and the incredibly rich life of Paris, and for a long time he is a prisoner

<sup>1</sup> Chamfort.



PHILIP OF ORLÉANS, REGENT OF FRANCE

Engraving after J.-B. Santerre

National Library, Vienna



behind the doors of the Pension Dangeau. This establishment, situated in the Rue de Charonne, was a foundation of the famous chronicler to the Court of Louis XIV, the Marquis Philippe de Dangeau, to whom Duclos pays tribute in his *Histoire de l'Académie française*. There twenty sons of the impoverished nobility were to receive a fitting education, and the curriculum was not allowed to belie this intention. "La sublime science du blason n'était pas oubliée dans une éducation destinée à des gentilshommes, dont chacun l'aurait inventée, si elle ne l'était pas," he observes in a mordant variation of a Voltairean *mot*. Nevertheless, to these five years at the *pension* Duclos owes a sound training in languages and history, and emulation of such fine people as the Chevalier d'Aydie (Voltaire's *preux chevalier*, whose romantic love affair with the Circassian girl Aïssé was later to amaze the whole of the illustrious world) certainly does his talent no harm. Besides, rapid and brilliant progress was the only means by which the ambitious scion of the *bourgeoisie* could make up for his lack of birth.

Quelque opinion que des enfants aient prise de leur noblesse dans leurs masures ou leurs châteaux, les qualités personnelles, les dons sensibles de la nature, tels que la force du corps et les talents de l'esprit, ne perdent point leurs droits à leurs yeux.

Then at the age of fourteen the little *savant* passes on to the Collège d'Harcourt. Here a wider field of scholastic endeavour opens before him. In spite of the *chicanerie* of the principal, Dagoumer, with whom Lesage also has a bone to pick in *Gil Blas*; in spite of bitter complaints about the time wasted on humanistic studies, plentiful class successes make these same years the happiest of his life. "Ces petits honneurs sont peut-être les plaisirs les plus vifs qu'on ait dans la vie." There is also the noble rivalry between him and the Marquis de Beauvau, for whom he brings away a lasting admiration and whose early death at Ypres, in 1744, inspires him to a touching word of friendship.

All this time, in the great life beyond the college walls, events have taken their course. Since 1715 Louis XIV (*la vieille machine*) has moved 'his' world no more; amid the jeers, songs, and dances of a starving mob his corpse has gone to the crypt of Saint-Denis, and, instead of hypocritically bending the knee before a *Jupiter séducteur et adultère*, the Court soon worships a whole Olympus of shamelessness. Louis XV, a child, still stands outside



it all, carefully shielded from every breath of air and from the malice of ambitious relatives; but the Regent, Philip of Orléans, that monstrosity of mud and fire, has led forth his troupe of "roués," male and female, to hold high revel round the empty throne. He pursues his avocation of vice with the assiduity of the German blood he gets from his mother, Liselotte of the Palatinate. "Il aura tous les talents, excepté celui d'en faire bon usage," the witty Princess said of her own son; and it was not her fault if the brilliantly gifted Prince did not turn out to be an exemplary ruler. In the oppressive atmosphere of hypocrisy with which La Maintenon odiously surrounded the great King's last days the Regent had already become convinced that the life of a man of honour is simply the art of hiding his own blackguardism. Whence followed his complete surrender to all his instincts, those licentious scenes in the Palais-Royal to which even his *valet de chambre*, Ibagnet, refused to hold a taper. True, the Regent's alleged behaviour toward his daughters may be only a *ben trovato* tagged on to history; in painting the Duchesse de Berry's midnight picnics in the Luxembourg Gardens (costume, *en peau*) the imagination of people who were not among those present may have laid on the flesh tint rather thick; and it is not certain that the Prince's eye-trouble was due to a jab from the fan of the assaulted Mme d'Arpajon. There remain, though, historically indisputable, his habitual drunkenness and his nerve-racking, at times brutal, adulterous *liaison* with Mme de Parabère; and the fact that as Regent he dispatched weighty affairs of State in bed, between kisses. Almost too kind, then, seems the tale of how the Prince, with words about God and eternity upon his lips, sank dying on to the bosom of the Duchesse de Phalaris in his last *petite heure du berger*. That with cynical wit he mocked his own want of principle, that after the unmasking of the Spanish plot of the Duc de Maine and Cellamare against the Regency he did not try the *condottiere* gesture of setting the crown on his own head, cannot humanly exonerate this *fanfaron du vice*.

Equally poor a plea is the dominating influence of his tutor and evil genius, Dubois. This upstart of immorality rose on his young friend's vices from the position of servant to the *curé* of Saint-Eustache to be Cardinal. He is flattered by Voltaire and Fontenelle as guardian of peace and intellectual freedom, cursed and cringed to by his whilom pupil, who calmly lets him sell France's



MME DE PARABÈRE  
Engraving after H. Rigaud



naval strength to England for a million, and has to forsake the bed of La Parabère, let him grind his teeth never so furiously, to go to see his "rapscallion" consecrated Bishop at Rheims and avoid falling out with both of them. No wonder that under such a lord and servant vice flourished at Court in rank luxuriance. Men like the Comte de Charolais and the Duc de Richelieu, who regularly brought their love affairs into the public streets by their bloody brawls, have their counterparts in the age of Rome's decadence. Mme de Tencin manages to slip into the Regent's bedroom, and there awaits him, standing naked and motionless on a pedestal as a statue of Venus. The Marquise de Gacé performs a Salome dance before a company of drunken gentlemen, and is then pushed out into the ante-chamber among the lackeys, "qui en firent à leur plaisir." Never, even in time of war, has venereal disease eaten deeper into the marrow of the *noblesse* and a more horribly degenerate brood of children been begotten. But the poison spreads from Court, by way of the town and the *bourgeoisie*, down to the common people, and, with the thrill that symptoms of big historic events send down our spines, we read in Marais the brief, matter-of-fact announcement, dated January 1721, that the naked body of a girl of the people has been found, frozen stiff, tied to a tree in the Bois de Boulogne, no doubt a victim of jealousy.

To this unchecked vertigo of dissipation must be added another distinguishing episode of the Regency, the mass psychosis of Law's 'System' (December 1718). The national poverty resulting from the last wars of Louis XIV has immeasurably enhanced the longing to make fantastic fortunes; the lack of money thereby becomes harder and harder to put up with; and so, with the true gesture of a messiah, the Scots adventurer appears on the scene at Versailles. He has had to hawk his theories of the omnipotence of credit, the superiority of paper over hard cash, through half Europe before the Regent and his Minister Dubois, hesitatingly at first in their promissory notes but then all the more eagerly, seize the promise-heaped hand he holds out to them. In this way the national happiness and prosperity are to become even more complete. Law's Bank, started as a private enterprise, is taken over by the State; milliards in *assignats* go fluttering into even the most out-of-the-way corners of the country; and a Compagnie des Indes dangles before the masses the prospect of illimitable treasures in distant lands.

Naturally the judgment of the people goes all to bits. An epidemic of money-fever sweeps over Paris, all classes are attacked by a wild fury of speculation, and the Rue Quincampoix in front of the bank becomes a battle-ground of savage passions. Nay, under the mastering impulse of greed the young Comte de Hoorn, a kinsman of the Regent, commits murder, and invites all Europe to the spectacle of a prince having to end his life on the wheel. Another consequence is a hitherto fabulous rate of luxury, which becomes a necessity even with the middle classes. Men and women revel in costly clothes and houses, multiplying their equipages and domestic staffs; the French *cuisine* soars to ultimate perfection, and a universal craze for theatricals deadens the national sense of stern reality. "L'étranger a tourné l'État comme un fripier tourne un habit." <sup>1</sup>

But intoxicating as was this Arabian Nights dream, correspondingly merciless was the awakening. After tottering a short time under the people's growing suspicion the System collapsed almost overnight (May 1720), burying in its ruins most of France's prosperity—and the moral strength of the nation also, for so paralysing was the despair that no avenging steel was lifted against the guilty ones. There were one or two polite little Rococo tragedies that gave a moment's pause to the leisured class; for instance, the positively last appearance of the *diva* Mazé, who, rouged, bepatched, and in flesh-coloured silk stockings like a bride, threw herself in broad daylight into the Seine. The people cheered themselves up with racy doggerel à la mode de Rabelais about the only use left for Law's bank-notes; and, quicker than it had come, misery was forgotten as life went sweeping on. Never before had the Paris Opéra shone with greater brilliance, and when the Regent gave a party at Saint-Cloud in honour of his mistress, Mme d'Averne, the crowd flocked to see the fun, in rags and hollow-eyed, but with excitedly red cheeks and gaping mouths.

How deep, nevertheless, the poison must have penetrated into the nation's body becomes sadly clear from the fact that even the steady, suspicious Bretons let themselves be whirled along in the general vertigo. And here, perhaps for the only time in her life, even Mme Duclos's sure sight fails her. To extend her business she has just sold several pieces of land and taken payment in the convenient bank-notes. Overnight bankruptcy sweeps away Law's

<sup>1</sup> Montesquieu.



JOHN LAW  
raving after H. Rigaud



System, and with it a good part of the family fortune. Here, as in corresponding passages of the *Mémoires secrets*, the indignation of the moralist and *bon bourgeois* Duclos knows no bounds:

Le dénouement de cette pièce fut d'avoir enrichi des fripons, grands ou petits; ruiné la moyenne classe, la plus honnête et la plus utile de toutes; confondu les conditions et altéré le caractère national. . . . La fortune de ma mère fut, sinon absolument renversée, du moins très altérée.

No wonder the frightened woman wants to remove her son from the expensive capital, and only the united appeal of all his Paris teachers softens her final decision. But when, after completing his *humanités* and spending a short time at home, the young man, in 1724, goes back to Paris, what attracts him there is less his law studies to become an *avocat*, the excuse with which he persuaded his mother, than the need for sowing his wild oats—an occupation to which he now devotes all his leisure. Instead of going to lectures he soon becomes a constant and formidable *habitué* of students' fencing clubs, practising his newly acquired and most ably cultivated art in after-supper skirmishes with the watch; and for the fact that he did not become one of the century's great adventurers the mature man, looking back, can thank only Providence—"cette Providence qui, à Paris, est plus grande qu'ailleurs."<sup>1</sup> But this topic of cavaliers of fortune deserves, as throwing light on an important characteristic of the age, a little further notice.

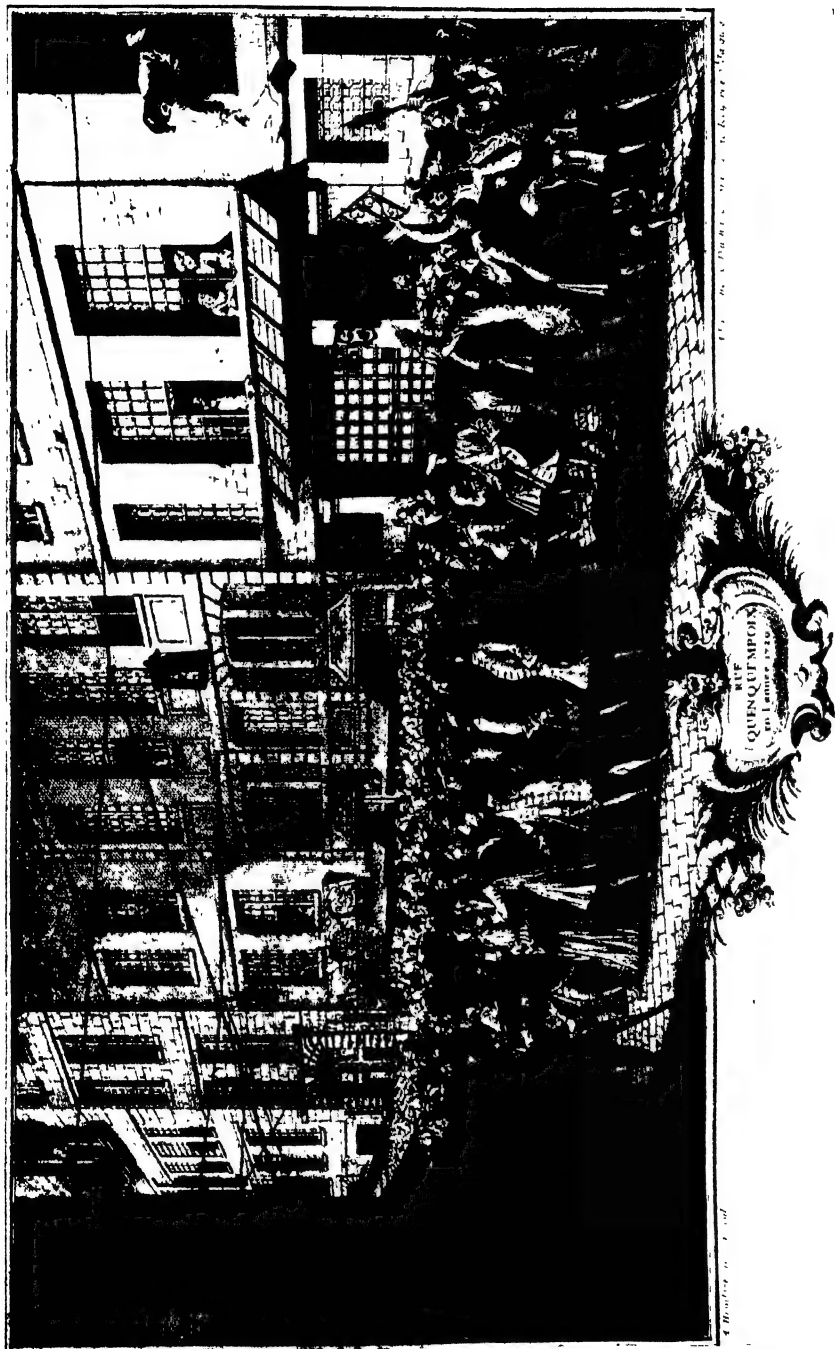
As after a big war, the financial catastrophe flooded Paris with an army of *chevaliers d'industrie*. The collapse of so many fortunes, the insecurity of life for some people, *ennui*, unsatisfied thirst for thrills on one side and the unchecked pursuit of enjoyment on the other, admirably prepared the soil, and all was ready for the fantastic epoch of Saint-Germain, Casanova, Cagliostro, and Mesmer. The memoirs of the period are full of absurd and entertaining, but also tragic, stories of the preternatural. To choose at random: the *esprit libre* Richelieu tries to invoke the devil by giving the Host to white and black he-goats, nor shrinks from murder to cover up the traces of his insane sacrilege. On the advice of a *voyante* two ladies of the Court wait naked in a lonely villa for the devil to appear; in vain, of course, for the medium has made off with their clothes and trinkets. The atheist Comte de Schomberg and Hobbes, the philosopher of Sensationalism,

<sup>1</sup> Rivarol.



are afraid of spooks; and Casanova even has his *Génie tutélaire* to pray to—Paralis, of whose powers he convinces innumerable people.

Unprotestingly and even with a certain feeling of gratification, Duclos too lets himself be drawn into the occultists' circle. It is so deliciously exciting to slink along at night through dimly lit lanes into the Palais-Royal, and there make one's way up stealthily to the top storey. At the door of a small *appartement* the sorcerer (on this occasion his name is Saint-Maurice) gives the visitor a welcome full of meaning and leads him inside. He is in a commodious room, austere in furnishing and colour but for the elegant lewdnesses in innocently bland frames that leer down from the walls; and the *retroussé* little nose of the buxom servant lass in the simple peasant costume hints "que si elle faisait le lit de son maître, elle le défaisait aussi." It is like the *petit souper* of a print by Moreau. The company sits down at table, the pigeons and the Burgundy are excellent; open flies the door, and in trips—no, floats—a vision. Truly a vision for a young man of twenty, "avec une ardeur immodérée pour les femmes. Je les aimais toutes, et je n'en méprisais aucune." But the fairy soon reveals herself as palpably human. A woman, though still bewitching, she edges nearer the youth; there is eating, drinking, laughing; gestures grow bold, already the outposts are engaged, when the mage with a dignified gesture bids all be still, and begins. Everything the guest sees there is the gift of the good genius Alaël, whose unworthy servant he (Saint-Maurice) may vaunt himself to be. But these gifts do not fall into one's lap unless return services are rendered. To enjoy such favours one must be an adept, and the mystic hour is not yet come. A second imperious sign lifts the table up from the floor, and, crowding together, they shrink away from it, the women giggling, Duclos half dazed but quickly consoled. For in the semi-darkness of the passage the nymph has flashed a speaking glance at him. . . . A day or two goes by. In the Tuileries one evening the youth feels his arm seized; he wheels round; it is Saint-Maurice. He leads Duclos to a quiet seat, and there reveals to him depths of fraud and devilment that leave the young man speechless. This pretty fellow has collected round himself a whole court of simpletons, who spend their money and nightly rest in commerce with the Unseen before the throne of friend Alaël. Saint-Maurice is their





high priest. The believers secretly assemble in a large room lit, or rather darkened, by two candles. A mighty brazier pours forth a stupefying vapour, and against this sullen red background the magician weaves cabbalistic words and gestures round his disciples. At last he comes majestically among them and collects the questions they have written to his tutelary genius. Every one sees him burn the papers on the coals, to make the questions rise to the spirit's throne. On the following day Alaël will answer them, for, of course, none of the dupes suspects that the charlatan takes the letters home safely in his pocket, and that what smoulders on the coals is only blank bits of paper. With an amused grin the *homme d'honneur* admits he finds it devilishly diverting to read the letters, especially those about women, in the comfort of his own *appartement*, and to compose replies that will give the maximum of pleasure. Duclos, at first shocked and indignant, cannot help laughing. Then the other becomes serious: he hopes the young man will not abuse the confidence that has been reposed in him. Moreover, he can see with his own eyes that Saint-Maurice has spoken nothing but the truth. There's to be another *séance* this evening. Pretty girls will be there, and Duclos knows from his own past experience that Alaël does not keep them all for himself. About money—well, he need not be anxious about that. This being astonished at things will soon wear off; he does not know Paris yet.

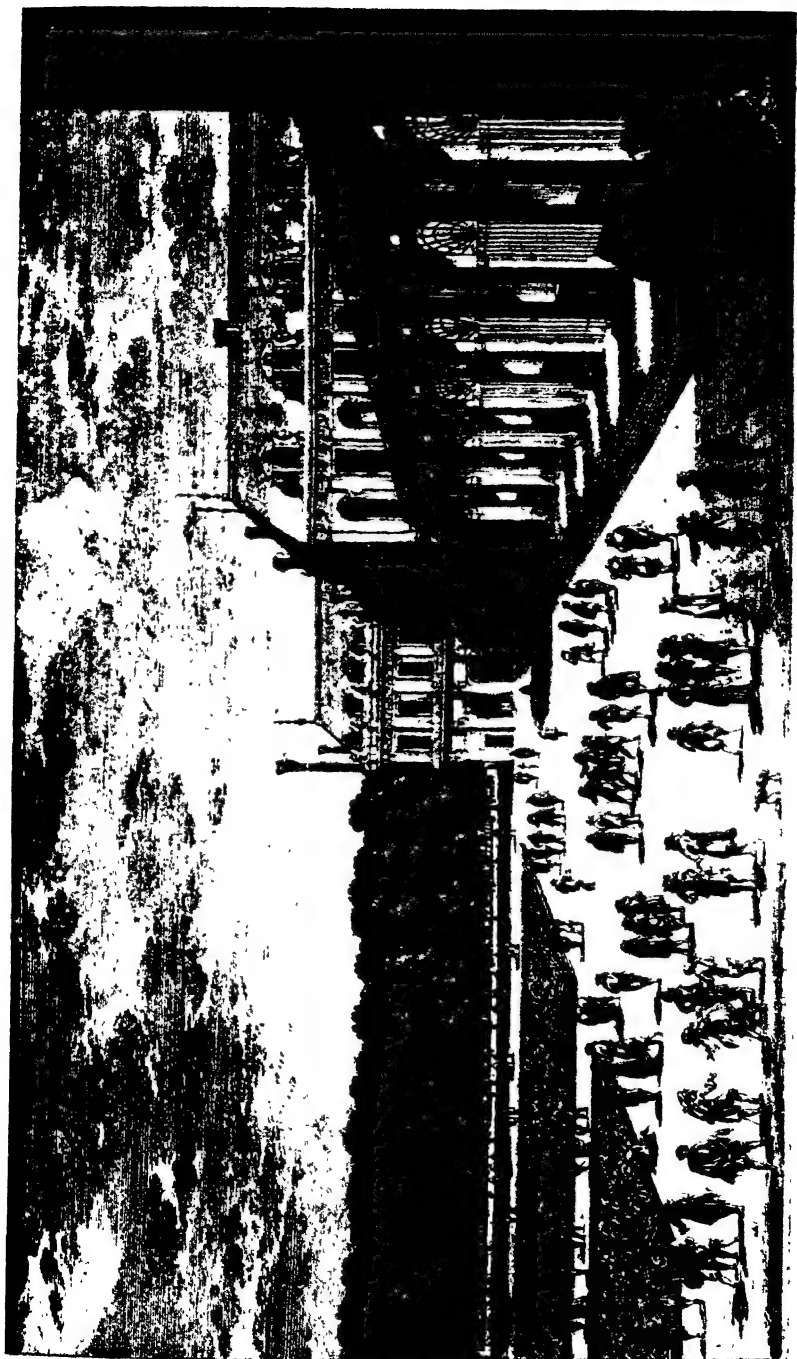
Dans cette ville, où la lumière de la philosophie paraît se répandre de toutes parts, il n'y a pas de genre de folie qui n'y conserve son foyer, qui éclate plus ou moins loin, suivant la mode et les circonstances. L'astrologie judiciaire, la pierre philosophale, la médecine universelle, la cabale, etc., ont toujours leurs partisans secrets. . . .

Gold and love's delight are powerful baits for the appetites of a boy of twenty. The youth wavers a moment under the temptation, then energetically shakes it from him. The other pleads, threatens; he has powerful friends whose wealth, whose influence, is at Saint-Maurice's disposal. . . . Without a word Duclos turns away. Here, where the writer casts back a complacent eye on the soundness of his behaviour, we onlookers cannot help having a private feeling that this St Anthony gesture is only the first appearance of Duclos's Breton pawkiness—that peasant cunning which was to steer him through abundance of pleasures on toward all material rewards, though at the price of a withered heart.

Still, who knows whither these paths might not in the end have enticed young Duclos if his worried mother had not intervened? She peremptorily recalls the prodigal son to Dinan. The time has not yet arrived when to the home-coming Duclos the towers of his native place will beckon like the gates of the Promised Land, and it is only with chagrin that he endures the stagnation of a little country town. His mother is not niggardly with reproaches, and makes him decide on a profession. His education has not fitted the budding *homme du monde* for commerce; he would only too gladly become a soldier, but the practical-minded woman will hear nothing of this *métier de libertin*; so the upshot of it all is that he is to complete his legal studies in Paris. During a short visit to his sister in Rennes at the end of 1725 Duclos makes the acquaintance, later to have important results, of the Government *avocat*, La Chalotais, whose stubborn character, lively wit, and enthusiasm for literature strike responsive chords in the young man's breast. In after-years there will develop from this casual encounter a firm friendship tested in gravest hours of need.

It may be that the overpowering, honeyed spell of Paris drove from the son's mind all remembrance of the promises he had made his mother, for he has no sooner arrived than he pitches his textbooks into the corner, gives the Latin and French poets the place of honour on his shelves, and begins to divide his time and money between the Comédie Française and the literary *cafés*.

Speaking from the fullness of his experience, the Abbé Galiani, in one of his letters, calls Paris *le Café de l'Europe*, and thereby aptly indicates the part played by the coffee-house in the city of freest social intercourse. For scarcely anywhere else, since the seventies of the previous century, had this focus of light, somewhat superficial intellect blazed into a more captivating brilliance; had the *café* become such a many-sided, masculine successor to the gallant *cours d'amour* of the Middle Ages, a fertile soil of such notable national genius for fleeting the time carelessly. "Le café, institution divine qu'on ne trouve bien qu'en France," cries Casanova enthusiastically, looking back in old age at the chief theatre of his social triumphs. At the very beginning of the eighteenth century the *café* achieved, after a few uncertain experiments, its final, its still unaltered form. The *limonadiers*, mostly of Italian extraction, do not stint expense on Venetian mirrors,





on chandeliers, on seats; the charming pencil of the engraver, the brush of a Hubert Robert, are called upon for the embellishment of ceiling and walls; tasteful, often valuable, *vaisselle* is at the command of special customers; coffee, liqueurs, *frappés* are to be had; journals and law books lie about, flysheets flutter in; chess, dominoes, cards attract their votaries into secluded corners; and in addition to all this there is the living chronicle of the times, the *nouvellistes*, going from one coffee-house to another with their "Aha! What did I tell you?" their practical jokes, their tall stories; everywhere awaited with impatience, hailed with enthusiasm. Affairs of State and private business, literature and money-making, commerce and art, science and broad banalities, buzz through the smoke-filled room as they do to-day. Men gather into knots and groups and hold heated discussions; incautious opinions are voiced about Church and State, are immediately and furiously contradicted; sometimes a *mouche* makes a sudden, cat-like dive into the confusion, hauls out one of the loudest critics, and hands him over to the constables patiently waiting outside; whereupon passions ebb, and one after another the guests sneak out by the back door. These ever-varying amusements, excitations, and excitements, even dangers, soon made the coffee-house a necessity for intellectual France, and all along the century extends the line of *piliers de café*, from Lesage and J.-B. Rousseau down to Chamfort. But even in the twenties the tree had reached its first blossoming in some four hundred Paris coffee-houses, three of which, in particular, became rendezvous of the artistic and intellectual life of those days—the Café de la Régence, in the Place du Palais-Royal, where later Diderot and d'Alembert become the dictators and Rameau's Nephew vents his loathing for life in venomous epigrams; the coffee-house of the Italian Procope, opposite the old Comédie Française (near the present École de Médecine); and the Café Gradot, on the Quai de l'École.

In the "Antre de Procope," "où l'on apprête le café de telle manière qu'il donne de l'esprit à ceux qui en prennent,"<sup>1</sup> a visitor might imagine himself to be in a preparatory school for the Academy. Ensconced in that retired corner, unrecognized in a strange coat and a broad-brimmed hat pulled well down over his eyes, Voltaire overhears the company's opinions on his latest

<sup>1</sup> Montesquieu, *Lettres persanes*.



published work. Here Piron drowns in coffee, tobacco-smoke, and noisy jests about the *racaille de chez Procope* his domestic troubles and his grievances against publishers. The critic Desfontaines suddenly perceives in some remark a good subject for his next literary article; while the Abbé Terrasson, a great linguist and the wisest fool that ever bored a company, sets up as counsel for the defence of Law's System, although he lost all his money through it. The grammarian Du Marsais drags young Duclos into a group of proselytes to his philosophic theory of language, and impels him to think out his own ideas, which result, though not until considerably later, in his edition of the *Grammaire de Port-Royal*. The Marquis de la Faye, an enlightened *bel esprit* and, with Voltaire, the most resolute defender of now out-moded verse, presides over a Table Round of æsthetic squires, who fully appreciate his princely revenues. Now and then the famous actor Baron, with his witty, malicious face, drops in. At once a crowd of enthusiasts, none quicker than Duclos, gathers round the Roscius of the eighteenth century, Molière's pupil and an inexorable judge in literary matters of his period. The old man begins to talk, and in his words the brilliance of a past theatrical epoch seems to come to life again. From a hundred tiny traits shines out the human greatness of the great Corneille; Racine appears as the scheming huckster of his fame; Boileau retreats to his position of hack. Molière and La Fontaine, however, are sealed as poets and philosophic intellects.

There, then, we have a picture of the coffee-house on days of peaceable discussion. The scene is vastly different when the cynic Boindin or the philosopher Fréret have tossed a theme of dissension into the company. In a trice the two champions are at it hammer and tongs; no less swiftly a dense ring of listeners encloses them, and in breathless tension, now and then finding vent in cheers, laughter, derision, follow the phases of the Homeric tussle. Boindin has on his side a reputation for atheism, a disconcerting presence of mind and readiness of tongue, and is never more ingenious than when he feels he is in the wrong. On principle he always upholds lost causes. His opponent speaks slowly, deliberately, and backs his arguments by numerous citations from ancient and modern literature. He has sound common sense on his side. This circle becomes for Duclos an intellectual *salle d'armes*. One day he breaks into one of these disputes with a



*Scenes de J. Aubin en 1871*

## LES NOUVELLISTES.

THE CAFE PROCOPE  
Engraving by G. de Saint-Aubin



trenchant comment. Boindin deserts his adversary, and hurls himself at this new foe. He, the atheist, is defending the proposition that the order of the universe is quite consonant with polytheism; and from the four corners of the globe he assembles sophisms to buttress up his tottering thesis. Duclos is for the ordering of a house under a single master: he listens for a time, only here and there interjecting a remark. Then suddenly he bursts out laughing. His opponent stops short, taken aback, and cries in a fury that laughter is no answer. "I quite agree," replies the other; "but as I was listening to you, the atheist, so vigorously defending polytheism there flashed through my mind the proverb, 'Il n'est chère que de vilain' ['If the miser does give anything he gives lavishly'], and that's why I couldn't help laughing." Cheers and catcalls issue from the audience, and the dispute is ended.

Thus Duclos practises on this fencing-floor the individual touch that later he will wield as a virtuoso in the most exalted society, that superior calm and presence of mind which there, as in the *salle d'armes*, make victory sure. Here, at an early period, he learns to use that sharpest of weapons for the battle of life, sovereign mastery over words, a power that, according to Voltaire, it may well take as long as half a lifetime to acquire.

In the Café Gradot, again, La Motte Houdar has gathered round him an academy of foes of verse, and, though blind and crippled, he commands a strong regiment. The aged Fontenelle sometimes occupies the place of honour, seconded by the incisive wit of the mathematician Maupertuis, and here Saurin comes to polish his dramatic style. A good many of Duclos's convictions about literary technique developed from the discussions in the Café Gradot. True, these champions of the moderns could not seriously diminish in his eyes the greatest of classical literature, and he will never fail to plunge with admiration and delight into the lives and writings of the ancients; but his prejudice against verse has its origin in these *causeries*. "Cela est beau comme de la prose" is in later years the highest praise he can give a piece of verse; and his literary practice does not belie his precept.

Meanwhile the threads have slowly spun themselves that are to raise Duclos by degrees from this literary *débauche d'esprit* into higher spheres and to a more assured reputation. For a time it is the same case of balancing on the edge of a precipice as with

Voltaire; at one's back the chasm of obscure birth, one's ardent gaze fixed on life's heights. Only the ascent is shorter, and yet more gradual, than for Voltaire, in whose veins flowed turbulent poetic blood. One or two noblemen, coffee-house acquaintances such as the Marquis de la Faye, young men about town of the Prince de Guise type, and patrons from home like the Forcalquier-Brancas family draw the ready-tongued wit and brilliant *homme à la mode* into their circles. Soon the most distinguished houses in Paris open their doors to him, and there opens out that life which is to lead the virtuoso of dissipation from his immersion in ancient and modern literature to coffee-house triumphs and ladies' *salons*, from the Comédie to nocturnal rites of Dionysus and Aphrodite. Duclos's rise brings him none of all those humiliations that the *parvenu* must usually learn to put up with. No sooner does he gain an entry into the Court circle than he strips his coffee-house past from him like a worn-out coat, and in later years only his enemies will be able to detect in his manner traces of his plebeian upbringing. And though Rameau's Nephew claims that music is the surest means of drawing tribute from the great, Duclos has a no less effective ally at his command, a dazzling *esprit* that brooks no opposition. Add to this, furthermore, the assured bearing that comes of calm self-knowledge, Breton restraint, and a most skilful maintenance of due distance. Above all other gifts he himself, however, prized personal freedom and independence; and he was careful to avoid being placed in any position, however advantageous otherwise, that would prevent his meeting *grands seigneurs* on an equal footing.

Raisonneurs beaux esprits, et vous qui croyez l'être,  
Voulez-vous vivre heureux, vivez toujours sans maître !

exhorts Voltaire; and, as though translated into workaday prose, the principle is repeated in the anti-verse writer Duclos: "A Paris, les hommes, pourvu qu'ils soient d'une famille honnête, et ne soient pas dans une dépendance personnelle, peuvent vivre avec ce qu'il y a de plus grand, si les mêmes goûts les associent."

Here, alas, on the threshold of the great world, the youthful memoirs break off! The future moralist is still at the beginning of his study of mankind, not yet has he vented his mind upon society in that intellectual *crapule* of Crébillon and Caylus at the social school of the actress Quinault, and for a long time he knows



VUE DU PAVILLON DE LA DUCHESSE,  
près de Marli, appartenant à M<sup>me</sup>  
la Comtesse du Barry.

ENNE, MME DU BARRY'S CHÂTELET  
Engraving after Testard



## PARIS UNDER THE REGENCY

woman's heart only on its weakest side. But already the guiding lines of his destiny have been established, drawn determinedly by his own masterful hand; and no man, we feel, was ever more fitted to achieve, through confidence and yet prudent care, the happy fortune of being a personality.





## THE WORKINGS OF FRENCH SALON LIFE

La bonne compagnie est indépendante de l'état et du rang, et ne se trouve que parmi ceux qui pensent et qui sentent, qui ont les idées justes et les sentiments honnêtes.

DUCLOS, *Considérations sur les mœurs de ce siècle*



IF, as Casanova says, only the stupid have the privilege of not being bored, the French eighteenth century must have been the most *spirituel* of centuries. *Spirituel* it was, indeed, but in a special way: divorced from real life, empty of sentiment, bored—bored by attempts, that led round in a vicious circle, to escape being bored. Sterile *esprit* of this sort becomes intolerable to itself unless interplaying with its like. Hence the eighteenth century clamoured for social life at all costs, engaged in a kaleidoscopic chase after people and things, experienced a helpless terror of solitude—that sharp, searching test of personality. “On se fait au plus grand bruit, comme à celui des vagues lorsqu’il est continuel, mais on ne se fait pas à la solitude.”<sup>1</sup> But of all the shifts and devices poor human wit contrived against the insidious *maladie du siècle*, one, the *salons*, included all the others, and became the distemper’s deceptive remedy.

Now wherever civilized people have gathered together for social entertainment their design has been to cheat Time, whose leaden hand presses so pitilessly upon us mortal men. But it is one thing to finish a light day’s work and then stroll with a band of ardent young men through the Academic groves, discussing in lively dialogues existence and its sequel, the destiny of earth and the Beyond; or in the gay assembly at a medieval court of love to lean by one’s lady’s side, still a-thrill with the tender passion of the madrigal whose notes have but now died away, and dream of the feats of prowess one will lay at her worshipped feet; or at a

<sup>1</sup> Galiani.

carousal in a Cinquecento palace to toss on the table, with a drunken laugh, a sword still wet with a vanquished rival's gore, then carelessly turn away and nip the calf of the nearest naked dancing-wench; or even, at the Hôtel de Rambouillet, subtly *fronder* the rude *Zeitgeist* of the Fronde and try, in the disputes of Jobelins and Uranistes, to put new life into the ageing French tongue. It is quite another thing to be driven by sheer pressure of life, because one cannot and may not do more, into a community of *fainéantisme*; to play cards or words, etch, pull gold threads, and dance pale-pink jumping-jacks before one's mistress's pretty little nose. That is what went on in the *salons* of the eighteenth century. And yet from this kind of occupation, continued for a century, blossomed the astonishing art of the French Rococo period; as perfect as La Pompadour's flower-painted china or a colour print by Moreau; so powerfully attractive that from this age, properly speaking, dates French supremacy in fashion, and Paris becomes more than ever the world's centre; and by no means contemptible, withal, for here it was that the *noblesse* learned to mount with grace to the guillotine.

What is *esprit*? Voltaire, the *philosophe*, following his master, Locke, defines it thus: "C'est l'art ou de réunir deux choses éloignées, ou de diviser deux choses qui paraissent se joindre." Sénac de Meilhan, at the end of the century, packs the same notion into two words, "Pénétration et imagination." However, he adds elsewhere, with gentle mischief:

Fancy is a feminine gift, and so it is woman whom *esprit* raises to the rulership of the century. How easy it is, too, for her to rule! Burdened with little learning, and therefore more naturally and more, as it were, on wings, she far outstrips men's slowly logical conclusions, laughs away the most reasonable objection, and if charm and archness adorn her sibylline lips she has conquered before the fight began.

"Quite correct," Mme Necker would say; "but what does this triumph profit her if, having neither heart nor taste, she simply toys with vain ideas, since real success, and social success too, flows only from a wealth of sincerity? Genius guides people heedfully through flowery gardens of mind and soul, but *esprit* sweeps them madly along, like the wicked jinn in *The Arabian Nights*, and abandons them in a desert, dying of thirst."

"What connexion of any kind has *esprit* with genius?" grumbles Sénac. "Doesn't Duclos brand genius with the phrase, *bête comme*

*un génie*? And, by Jove, he's confoundedly right! When has real merit ever brought anybody social success? And what great man can force himself to stoop for very long to the mediocrity of 'the world,' when he towers head and shoulders above it? Think of that tragi-comic scene at the big dinner where Rousseau, that over-grown child, furiously gnaws his nails, while his pretty neighbour, red as fire through her paint, bites her lips until they bleed at the thought of the enormity he has just whispered in her ear. And to see David Hume, seated pasha-like between two *belles* of the company, patting himself helplessly on belly and knee and bleating like a lamb, so that one of the girls indignantly jumps up and exclaims, 'Cet homme n'est bon qu'à manger du veau!' Even the *brevet de grand salonnier* Grimm wanted to present with all due solemnity to his friend Diderot is only the exception that proves my rule."

"True, true!" agrees Mme Necker. "And, if one comes to consider it, quite natural. For the man of serious intellect, used to brooding in solitude over complicated chains of thought, has never learned how one snatches at sudden fancies as they flash past in a stream of chatter. He likes to express the result of fruitful meditation in solid, short, and simple form, and stands helpless before the preciosity of the *beaux esprits*—'qui souvent font traîner un carrosse par quatre puces.'"

"For that reason, however"—here Chamfort joins in the discussion—"genius doesn't break its shins over the *sot* as often as *bel esprit* does. For it is only a quarter-truth that the *sots* are the portion of the *spirituels*. On the contrary, it is the fools who live on the mistakes of the wise."

"Come, come! We've had enough of all this carping," protests the Comte de Ségur. "Confess that *esprit*, even *esprit de société*, is an admirable quality, one that Europe may envy us. Would you have our women imitate those of England, who are so cowed by their husbands' coarse jokes that they scarcely open their mouths before a stranger, afraid of his committing an assault on them? Or are you for beguiling the dullness of the workaday with coffee fumes and the click of knitting-needles, as the Germans delight to do? No, no; long live masculine *esprit*, inspired and given wings by the presence of the ladies! Of course, however, with wit must be allied good taste—that most exquisite delicacy of feeling, born of long repose and nurtured by a thousand apprecia-

tive enjoyments of nature and art. 'Le goût est à l'esprit ce que la grâce est à la beauté.' But to few is this precious gift granted, never to the studious pedant, seldom to the *bel esprit*. Irremediably, for example, that flatterer sinned against good taste who cried to a charming girl in Society, 'Ah! que vous rappelez bien ce mot d'Aristénète, "Est-elle parée, elle est belle! Est-elle nue . . . c'est la beauté!"' "

“Yes, a little saving common sense can never do any harm,” Duclos concludes, with a laugh, “for he who aspires to be a wit without the proper qualifications stamps himself a *sot* before he knows it. ‘Tout est compatible avec l’esprit, et rien ne le donne.’ On the whole, though, *beaux esprits* are to be found nowadays at every street-corner. A man has only to announce in loud tones that he alone has a lease of true wit, and immediately the *sots* flock round him; the true wits and their audience shake their heads sadly and retire, and the pretender continues to hold the field. Only he should not let himself be persuaded by the poor in wit to express his cosmic thoughts with the pen, or all is up with his reputation. He ought not to fall into the mistake of putting his dazzling gifts even to the most modest public service, for he has been quite spoilt for that. ‘L’universalité des talents est une chimère.’ And those darlings of the gods who, like Voltaire, survey the whole field of human action, fructifying and hallowing it, are the rare grace and privilege of a whole century. The smaller men meanwhile crawl together to the doors of the *bureau d’esprit*, they cling to one another like a bunch of rats tied together by their tails, they struggle and climb over one another. ‘S’ils ont tant d’esprit, . . . c’est qu’ils n’ont pas le sens commun.’”

That, then, is the twofold and hard-to-grasp *modus operandi* of the element that for centuries ruled and tyrannized over French Society. Really important life in literature, the fine arts, and science would have wilted in such a hothouse atmosphere. And though Brunetière says somewhere that the history of French literature in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries finds its climax in the development of the *salons*, from the Hôtel Rambouillet to Mme Récamier's, a more judicious estimate will surely show that these writers were for the most part quite outside and opposed to the *salons d'esprits*. Still, the purely human qualities of this Society-form are probably immortal, as regards the inward and outward harmony of the social life. For the *salons* of the

eighteenth century brought the bloom of Gallic *art de vivre* to its fullest development—conversation.

The French conversation of the eighteenth century is the most delicate and feminine of arts. Born of the marriage between masculine *esprit* and feminine *goût*, it is nurtured and fostered by women, and finally woman rules in it as in her rightful realm. There is no nobler art than to control an exciting conversation with firm yet unseen hand; to wave aside by a graceful turn of wit some threat to the verbal stream's easy flow; to introduce, as if by chance, into the sequence of ideas a topic of general interest to which each member of the group can add before passing it on; or to remove an assertive speaker gently from the centre of attention before he is silenced by his audience's displeasure. In short, to be a goddess, giving and taking, that all with one accord may find pleasure in their own and others' worth. "Vous avez été charmant aujourd'hui," Mme Geoffrin says one day to the Abbé de Saint-Pierre. "Madame, je ne suis qu'un instrument dont vous avez bien joué," is his smiling reply. Taste and *savoir-faire*, however, must work hand in hand to produce good conversation. The witty man must deliver even his most surpassing *mot* without a flourish, lest even for a moment the smooth flow of the conversation should be disturbed. If a speaker feels his gorge rising he must firmly curb himself and not let one choleric word, one dogmatic yes or no, escape his lips. Nothing is harder to forgive than open contradiction. The treasures of a richly stocked mind will be sparingly displayed, and never used to win an argument by a specious intellectual mobility. Nobody must be button-holed away from the general discussion and drawn into a window recess for private demonstration. The difficult art of listening when pretty women talk—nay, even when one's hated rival is speaking—must be practised until perfect; a discreet smile, even at lame wit, and suitable interjections are imperative. At six in the evening a man will whisper to the *belle* at his side something other than at midnight: nay, more, *galanterie* will take its tone from the colour of the room wherein the company is assembled. Modulation of the voice demands the closest attention, according as one is conversing quietly, vivaciously, passionately, or wittily; and here constant practice will ensure social success. So, too, will steady exercise of presence of mind, for the graceful rhythm of a beautifully flowing conversation is at times so delicate that the buzzing



# *Conversation galante*

*Par M. de La Harpe, Auteur de l'Épître sur le Commerce, de la Tragédie de l'Épave, &c. &c.*

CONVERSATION GALANTE  
Engraving after N. Lancret



of a fly, the lightest movement of a chair, is enough to break it; and then only impudent resourcefulness can rescue the jarred tone.

Thus there grows, from a thousand separate little strokes, the *médiocre* work of art of French conversation, to whose suave strength Voltaire still pays homage in his old age: “La douceur et la sûreté de la conversation sont un plaisir aussi vif que celui d’un rendez-vous dans la jeunesse.” Galiani, it is true, rebels on one occasion against the restraints of *bon ton*, and thinks a gallant proposal more fitly clothed in a vigorous “Miaow!” than in a *cliché* from the “most Asiatic” of languages. But in a letter to Mme d’Épinay (December 15, 1770) he records with burlesque sorrow that his teeth are falling out; not that he laments diminished pleasures of the palate, but now the horrible hissing and stuttering of his bare jaws has irreparably destroyed his charm as a *causeur*. The whole of Galiani’s rare gifts were squandered, just as those of most of his *philosophe* friends, in the small change of *salon* small talk. And transient pleasure, scintillating wit, and success as *homme du monde* are paid for by the waste of much surpassing talent, as even such a man as Duclos, with the bitter mediocrity of authorship, of self-sacrificing and solitary work, never realized. But style in life and writings, suppleness and polish as men, indefinable charm, crystal clearness of lines of thought—these even Voltaire and Montesquieu learned from the perfect poise of frivolous Society’s tone. Nay, even Rousseau’s immortal works, though directed against the *salons*, are in form and treatment their product. It is from the *salons* that the ideas of philosophic France make their conquering progress through Europe and the world, borne by the language of the most social nation on earth, “d’une nation qui a besoin de parler pour penser et qui ne pense que pour parler.” It is in the *salons* that there is first condensed from rumour and experience, true incident and fancy, something of a public purpose, which newspapers and pamphlets then diffuse into the great world outside, and which will end by placing Revolution on the throne and adoring her. And even when life has led these people far from one another across land and sea they gather and hoard with almost miserly care the poor crumbs of lost pleasures in that elegant and melancholy interchange of letters which even to-day catch strangely at our hearts.

In the intimate minor art of conversation the social life of the eighteenth century developed one of its surest means of bringing



people together without regard to rank and opinions. And yet this art is but one sphere of that impressive striving toward perfect all-round charm, the passport demanded of all who wished to enter *mondaine* life in those days. There fanatics of pleasure or prophets of renunciation find no room. Princes and courtiers, the brilliant and the learned, artists and men of letters—sheer humanity makes them in an instant all equal, as great a leveller as love or play. “La société de Paris,” says Mme Geoffrin, “ressemble à une quantité de médailles renfermées dans une bourse, lesquelles, à force de s’être frottées longtemps l’une contre l’autre, ont usé leur empreinte et se ressemblent toutes.” He is a fool who, like Rousseau, surlily displays all the sharp corners of his nature in society, as a poor plebeian who has not known how to make secure his seat at the feast of life. For him not even Montesquieu’s proud saying means anything: “Le mérite console de tout.” Nor the sheerly human loveliness of that legendary message Stanislaus Poniatowski, just become King of Poland, sent Mme Geoffrin, his second mother: “Ma chère maman, je règne, ne me grondez pas !” And this miracle of refining influence was worked, again let it be emphasized, by woman. Let the *philosophes* have their little joke about woman’s sweetening society as sugar does coffee; let social artists of Casanova’s type cross themselves thrice in mock terror before the educated woman: for all that, the queen and mistress, the centre and aim of this sociability, in all its frivolity, in all its unrestrained pleasure-seeking, is woman—the mature woman in whom nought remains of the young girl’s blind innocence, who looks at life with eyes fully opened and who can seize it, with her firm little hand, without prudish fears of becoming soiled.

“Mon enfant,” so may perhaps a careful tutor or a wise mother have said to their young charge, “you stand on the threshold of the great world and look with a beating heart at its gay confusion, as a general hesitates before the battlefield on which his victory or defeat will be decided. Courage, then; grasp life gladly with both hands; meet every one as though you sought their friendship, flatter their self-love and bid your own be silent! Then you will please, which is the first step toward success. This for the beginning, for it will soon dawn upon you that even the cleverest man never finishes learning the hard art of pleasing—‘et que le plus grand art pour plaire est de n’en pas avoir.’ Your gaiety must be



Desmarteau del. - W. Moreau le Jeune sculp.

Gravé par Robelin.

## *Le Souper fin*

LE SOUPER FIN  
Engraving after Moreau le Jeune  
Albertina, Vienna



as variable as the weather's moods in April; indeed, you might well send a good joke rocketing into Society as did the effervescent young Marquise de Livry when she hurled her dainty little Cinderella shoe at the head of some one who was worsting her in argument, and thus gloriously won the day. For 'Pour réussir dans le monde, il faut avoir l'air fou, et être sage.' But in this avoid making yourself ridiculous as you would the plague! It is more certain death than bankruptcy or loss of honour. Not less ought you to shun the other extreme of being sullen. It blunts your wit, hardens your heart, and twists your features so wry that people hate to look at you. When you mix with your fellows you must leave your ego at home that you may find it again in their regard for you. 'Le meilleur moyen de n'être pas oublié des autres, c'est de ne jamais penser à soi.' So modestly play second fiddle to others, be glad to acknowledge your defects and loud in proclaiming others' merits. But no confidences, mark you, such as could make you forfeit Society's esteem. Reveal little of yourself, and keep your visits short. Be careful not to indulge in malicious *persiflage*, for the reputation of being *méchant* is a two-edged sword that only too often turns against its wearer. It is true that graceful slander is always sure of its success, and you too will have to wield this elegant weapon some day; but only the ripest social experience manœuvres skilfully in this field. 'La médisance même cesserait de plaire, si elle était dépourvue d'agrément.' At all times, however, questions annoy which seem to pry into another's soul or pockets; and unless you want to be fleeced don't even ask if anyone can give you change for a louis. Practise a thoughtful courtesy that comes from the heart, and not the politeness that imagines a curt *Pardon!* excuses any rudeness, and that made Mme Geoffrin have the Abbé Quasco thrown out of her house. There is no reason to be disturbed because the great world likes to toy with graceful depravity, and tolerates gallant minikins in cassocks, *demi-mondaines*, even poltroons. The graceful libertine is, none the less, one of the death-germs of our civilization. Be very careful not to have too flexible a mind and character; and equally avoid being like the jack-of-all-trades of whom somebody has said, 'Quand on n'a rien, on a le choix de tout.' For *gaucherie*, like *bêtise*, is social death. Display your talents, then; but sparingly, and only when you have practised them. A light conversational talent will always find you appreciative

hearers; people will be glad to listen to a well-trained voice, if only to enjoy the sound. A deft hand at etching, an elegant manner at the card-table, will have their value, and amateur theatricals give an opportunity for showing off histrionic gifts. That a painstakingly *soigné* exterior, distinguished yet simple, puts all these talents in their proper frame I need scarcely impress upon you in this age of Buffon and Necker—although a handsome, or even a merely agreeable, presence is not indispensable for creating an attractive effect, and Saint-Évremond, for example, despite his double hump over the nose, used for many years to have the richest circle of fine ladies round him all the evening. Last, but not least, be your true self! ‘Soyons ce que nous sommes; n’ajoutons rien à notre caractère; tâchons seulement d’en retrancher ce qui peut être incommode aux autres et dangereux pour nous-mêmes. Ayons le courage de nous soustraire à la servitude de la mode, sans passer les bornes de la raison.’ ”

The brilliant perfection, however, to which social life was polished in the French eighteenth century cannot blind even the most favourable observer to the heavy shadows lurking everywhere among the high lights. He may not, it is true, go all the way with Proudhon, who, in his *De la Justice dans la révolution et dans l'église*, makes with impudent bluntness the unhappily very just assertion that wherever women have been even so much as men's equals it has been at the expense of civilization. Even the most cautious critic, though, must (as already emphasized) note for a sad fact this doll society's want of heartfelt sentiment, its frittering away of what is man's most precious gift in megrims and *vapeurs*, its helpless inability to recognize true feeling when it comes, as shown, for example, in the question the young man asks his tutor during the play, “Monsieur, ai-je du plaisir?” Even the Rousseau-and-nature enthusiasm of later decades of the era produced in this respect nothing more than the change of a fashion. It must be confessed, too, that woman, queen of the *mondains salons*, becomes far too often only a plaything passed from one coarse hand to another; as also the graceful skirmishes of wit in brightly lighted drawing-rooms were, for the most part, the preliminaries to sweet battles *à deux* in dim boudoirs. Even in the ‘intellectual’ circles of the *bureaux d'esprits* a nervous bustle of Protean versatility stood in the way of every serious chance of depth. Even here *caillettes* and *espèces* were soon all over the

place. They threaded amorous conversations through the needle-eye of their tiny wit, and proclaimed their humanity in the caressing animal names they gave one another (*mon chat, mon hibou*, and so forth). On ladies' dressing-tables the *Encyclopédie* lay side by side with the *Portier des Chartreux*, and either was picked up at random to dispel *ennui*. With the same object, also, the play-acting of everyday life was transferred to the boards of private theatres. Thought so shrivels in these tiny brains that writers who at first sought inspiration in the *salons* soon felt the paralysis of affected wit creeping over them. "Les beaux esprits sont comme les roses; une seule fait plaisir, un grand nombre entête." Yet happy the man who, as in the Hôtel Brancas, could lead the life of an *esprit noté*! The *beaux esprits* fashioned their own little verbal *vaisselle* to serve their wit in. On Duclos's malicious computation the vocabulary of the fashionable world was even smaller than an Opéra ballet-girl's, and the Minister d'Argenson is said to have owed his downfall in large measure to the racy popular expressions with which he loved to blast the sensitive feelings of polite hearers. Intellectual activity far too often confined itself entirely to that most human of gifts, inquisitiveness: "Paris est la capitale de la curiosité." History grimaces, however, when she records that these same *gens du monde* whose aim in life was the perfect ordering of human relations could not even find their adjustment to their own people. They paid for their ignorance of life beneath the guillotine.

French literature of the eighteenth century has left us two accounts in particular of how the complex, coruscating, and yet cramped life of the *salons* was mirrored in the judgment of contemporaries whose education and talents placed them in its midst. The phenomenon comes under the probe of a ruthless intellect in Chapters VIII and IX ("Sur les Gens à la mode" and "Sur le Ridicule") of Duclos's *Considérations*. There an outstandingly brilliant *esprit* pours parting scorn upon all the little tricks and shifts to which he himself owes the greater part of his success. He has the gesture of one destroying his own kingdom, so that nobody shall rule there after him. Which did not, however, prevent the rise of Sénac de Meilhan and Chamfort. It is into the grotesque distortion of the footlights, however, that the droll poetaster Poinset (Le Mystifié) drags, in 1764, his *Cercle, ou la Soirée à la mode*. Defenceless butt of countless anecdotes and malicious jokes, yet

loth to turn his back resolutely upon *salon* life, the victim of many hoaxes here morosely pokes public fun at his tormentors. Let it be noted, with an understanding smile, that in so doing he presents to us some delightfully successful types.

For the rest, it is significant that the very persons who have carried *esprit de société* to the heights of success and perfection end by denying it their allegiance. There instinctively the genius of a whole generation seems to have felt the point at which negation of self, the descent to death, began. Thus Voltaire, in his *Épître à Hénault*, heaves a sigh of deliverance and pulls a long nose at his tyrant *esprit*:

Le bel esprit est un tourment.  
On est dupe de son talent.  
C'est comme une épouse coquette. . . .  
Elle est des autres l'agrément,  
Et le mal de qui la possède.

Chamfort calls fame "l'avantage d'être connu de ceux que vous ne connaissez pas." Mme Necker draws a thick stroke through her whole past with the avowal, "Il faut regarder comme un gain tout le temps qu'on dérobe à la société." "O obscurité! Tu es la sauvegarde du repos, et par conséquent, du bonheur," sighs the Marquise de Créqui, and seems thereby to stretch out her hand across time and space back to the Prince de Ligne, who enshrined his brilliant, tender, gay, and throbbing experience of life into the lapidary sentence:

En proie à l'envie, si on a du mérite; livré au mépris, si l'on n'en a pas; des amis qu'on ne peut obliger, mais des ingrats, si l'on a du crédit; des humiliations, si l'on n'en a pas; toujours des soupçons; quelquefois des besoins: Voilà la vie de l'homme [du monde].

In this realm of *esprit*, then, when it still flourished with an ever-increasing splendour, Duclos ruled for many years, freer and more self-assured than Voltaire, and different, also, from his teacher, Fontenelle. The latter, a pattern of the most perfectly rounded charm, nursed almost in silence the reputation he had won, let his opportunity come to him, and then got the very utmost out of it in scrupulously selected words. "Il pesait une pointe dans les balances de toile d'araignée." He was a virtuoso at egging on into the heat of argument an imprudent man resolved to scintillate at all costs. Fontenelle meanwhile, biding his time in eclipse, quietly sharpened the blade that was to travel straight

## FRENCH SALON LIFE

into his adversary's heart; but this without fuss or passion—he had a special gift for putting the vanquished gently to social death. Duclos was quite different, and to the feline lissomness of *salon* life brought a long-unheard-of inflexibility, producing all the greater monumental effect, naturally, against this constantly shifting background. A rough and strongly marked character was the element on which his life was built. He pounced everywhere upon the chance of a fight, and with downright sparkling wit he beat his opponent to a standstill. His tremendously muscular phrases slashed like claws, and even when he had to yield the field, as to Grimm in the case of Mme d'Épinay, he did it inch by inch and with a lion's snarls.





## THE BOUT DU BANC

Ah, malheureux, qui péchez sans plaisir,  
Dans vos erreurs soyez plus raisonnables :  
Soyez au moins des pécheurs fortunés,  
Et puisqu'il faut que vous soyez damnés  
Dammiez-vous donc pour des fautes aimables.

VOLTAIRE, *l*



IF in the eighteenth century writers and artists wanted to live life to the full in honest 'animalness,' they had almost richer encouragement than nowadays. Besides the coffee-houses, where all the time an intellectual *élite* settled, at least theoretically, the future of their contemporaries, there were the *cabarets*, still (unlike those of to-day) the home of the primitively robust humanity of Teniers's taverns, and devoted to the roystering service of Bacchus and Venus. Here men like Gallet and Laujon bawled their drinking-catches through the smoke-foul, low-ceilinged rooms, groped with wine-tremulous hands for the curved contours of the female form, welcomed the coming and sped the parting guest with obscenities of Biblical monstrosity, just as in the Montmartre pot-houses where artists met thirty years ago. Here the Collés and the Carmontelles got their types for wanton Society-pieces and semi-nudes, which afterward would give Mesdames les Marquises, sheltered behind their fans and paint, a *frisson* down to the very depths of their corrupt little souls.

Intellectual tourneys, again, were fought in the lists of the literary amateurs' book-lined rooms, as, for instance, in the library of the royal physician Falconet or in Quesnay's apartments at Versailles. If, on the other hand, the literary or artistic tyro wanted to make his way in Society he needed only to sharpen to epigrammatic point in the *salons*, like Galiani and Chamfort, his observation of life, his creative impulse, his hate, and his love, in order to have the very objects of his onslaught gathered round him worshippingly.

The El Dorado, however, of all who stood aloof, as well as of the newcomers who pressed impetuously toward success, the place where souls unlocked themselves most unreservedly, where thoughts and desires leaped forth in starkest nakedness, was the intellectual picnic of *gens de lettres*. Thus, from the Abbé Alary's Club de l'Entresol there ventured forth, born before their time, the ideas of an Abbé de Saint-Pierre; here the Marquis d'Argenson made energetic strides toward the political heresy of his *Considérations sur le gouvernement de la France*, and Montesquieu clarified the vague republican ideal of the *Lettres persanes* to the lucidity of the *Esprit des lois*. As a sort of burlesque on this club the Régiment de la Calotte had, ever since the great carnival of the Regency, belaboured the follies of its contemporaries with a buffoon's bladder and without respect for persons. Whoever had distinguished himself in any way, whether glorious or shameless, was pressed into this regiment with all due form and ceremony by means of a *brevet*. Crébillon père owed his diploma to the orgy of blood in his tragedies; Law qualified by the lunacy of his System; the procuress Fillon had to join the band as "chef de bataillon des vestales et vivandières." Each new member is branded, in a perfectly shameless *chanson*, with his style and title, which for the rest of his life he will never lose.

More popular in character, of the stamp of those artists' taverns of Gallet and Laujon, but more exclusive and intimate, are the Dîners du Caveau (from roughly 1730 onward), to the boisterous mirth of which, besides Piron, Collé, and the two Crébillons, Duclos also contributed his sharp wit. At these carousals Gallet ultimately drank himself to death; Piron extolled, to the despite of La Chaussée's buskined muse, the barefoot sister of Apollo:

Salut à la belle aux pieds nus,  
Nargue de la Chaussée !

Crébillon père and his "best work," Crébillon fils, came to hard blows because the son had cast doubts upon his father's authorship; and for the first time Duclos found leisure to steep himself in the charming shamelessness of Boucher's nymphs.

From here it is but a step further to the depraved grace and solid sybaritism of the Bout du Banc (also known as the Académie de ces Dames et de ces Messieurs; it existed from about 1730 onward).

In the eleventh book of his *Confessions* Jean-Jacques says of the deliciously intimate meals at the Duc de Luxembourg's home at Montmorency, "qu'on y dînait presque en l'air, et comme on dit, sur le bout du banc." Here we have the most likely explanation also of the whimsical name of that literary group to which Rousseau himself belonged in later years. There eating and drinking were haphazard and unimportant, an inkstand served as epergne, literary and artistic trifles were handed round instead of courses. The meeting-place was alternately the *palais* of the Comte de Caylus, the club's founder and president, and the modest dwelling of the actress Quinault; *esprit* and *cœur* going hand in hand even in this arrangement. The circle met on Sundays, after dinner. The Comte de Maurepas brought his caustic wit here from his Ministerial desk, received contributions for, and recited from, his famous *Recueil* of lightly draped and biting epigrams in song form; unless, indeed, the Marquis Louis d'Argenson was in the right vein and, in serio-comic consultation with La Quinault, let names be submitted to him for the next Académie election. Much to the vexation of his 'mistress,' La Geoffrin, the silent Pont de Veyle only too readily exchanged the rôle of faithful house-dog by her fireside for even the lowest place at the Bout du Banc. He acted as foil to the effervescent Abbé de Voisenon, who presently was to put the illustrious and wanton company, under animal guise, into his *romans* and anecdotes. Saint-Lambert, again, Nature's poet, indulged in licentious fantasies about 'natural' love, which he later put into not by any means poetic practice on Voltaire's "divine Émilie"; or engaged in epigrammatic set-to with the boyish Boufflers, ere yet the latter's wings had grown for his butterfly flittings from one breast to another. In words of smiling wisdom Mme de Verrue recalled the long-dead days when she, the envied *dame de volupté* at the Court of Savoy, took heed for her temporal salvation and

Pour plus grande sûreté  
Fit le paradis de ce monde.

Nay, even the stern Montesquieu found it not beneath his dignity to descend to this *crapule d'esprit* and cool his burning sexual itch in the shower-bath of salacious anecdotes.

Round this Olympus of distinguished lords and ladies swarmed a scintillating crowd of lesser gods in careless delights of mind and body. Voltaire came here during his brief sojourn in Paris

only to breathe forth his loathing of life and love in mordant wit, but the Crébillons, *père et fils*, jousted amusingly until the son ungently knocked his father out of the saddle. Piron ‘sneezed’ his epigrams into the company’s face, and more than once dragged Voltaire’s *esprit* from its shell and made it stand up to his sturdy Burgundian good sense—stoutly seconded by the young Duclos, whom he had introduced into this circle as a kindred spirit. Marivaux found plenty of material here for his *romans*, Collé drew from this source many of the people in his comedies, and at Duclos’s wit Mme de Graigny warmed her groatsworth of literary talent to a brief show of life. Later, when *philosophie* began to rule this Court of Love, Rousseau (round about 1753) forgot here for a few moments his artistic *Weltschmerz* and his gnawing hunger for fame, often under the gaze of his adored Comtesse de Houdetot, who sat opposite him with sweetly smiling eyes; Diderot gave vent to his strong licentiousness in monstrous obscenities, and d’Alembert studied the mathematics of love—all this to the great amusement of ladies like Mme d’Épinay, for whose freedom of speech and of opinions her sponsor, Duclos, had not vouched in vain; of her sister, Mme de Jully, who found full leisure here to fix her first rendezvous in bed with the singer Jélyotte; or of Duclos’s witty patroness, Mme de Rochefort, who had first to pass through this high school of social *ton* with her *protégé*. Lastly Olympe, Mlle Quinault’s niece, after listening at the key-hole to a discussion between Diderot and d’Alembert “sur la divination de l’amour,” put what she had heard into practice—as it turned out, to her lasting happiness.

Now unapproachable as a pasha, and at other times plunging into the spate of talk and passion where it was thickest, presided over this academy of immorality Philippe de Tubières, Comte de Caylus. The name recalls the authoress of a little duodecimo volume of shy *Souvenirs*<sup>1</sup> of Louis XIV’s Court, one of the most lovable women of her cold epoch. About her the Count, her son, wrote a moved and touching memoir that does him, the truest scion of his libertine century, no less honour than Duclos’s strong and filial feeling. Nevertheless, the son inherited from this noble lady nothing but a huge fortune and an ancient name, which his capricious pedantry distorted to snobbish pride of birth. Though wine-brother to the sorriest toppers, with ostlers’ oaths on his lips,

<sup>1</sup> 1770.

and in mind and person slovenly in the extreme, he well knew how to keep his distance from the brutally despised *racaille littéraire*. Kindred natures like Duclos, who would not kowtow to him in their own realm of letters, he relegated with the utmost iciness to the confines of their humble descent. Duclos above all, and the *philosophes*, were never forgiven by this otherwise confirmed and unrestricted freethinker for letting him, the "dilettante," stand outside the doors of the Académie; he gave Mme Geoffrin the choice between his society and theirs, and uncivilly refused to be immortalized in Voltaire's *Temple du goût*. So much for the putting into practice of his noble instincts. In addition, however, two passions only filled this eccentric's life—collector's curiosity and unbridled, filthy pursuit of pleasure. The former impulse took him as a young man to the East, where, often clad as a beggar, and protected by hired robbers, he penetrated into the most out-of-the-way corners and made astonishing finds. Then he bestowed effective patronage on native artists such as Watteau, Boucher, and Cochin; and those rich collections of ancient art and culture, to acquire which his agents were to have no scruples even about theft, to-day in the Louvre still praise the name of Caylus louder than his scientific works, whose claim to immortality has already been denied by Lessing. Then there was his second passion—to be, physically, the thorough male. Plebeianly robust, and dressed in woollen stockings, a coat of coarse brown cloth with brass buttons, and a broad slouch hat that shadowed contradictorily aristocratic features, this offshoot of a bluest-blooded family more than once descended among the populace where it was filthiest. He revelled in Rabelaisian obscenities, and boasted that he deserved them. Nay, the appropriate prints to d'Argens's gracefully lewd *Thérèse Philosophe* passed, under Caylus's signet, from dressing-table to dressing-table, and belied the rumour that the Count had taken to the burin so as not to be compelled to hang himself from boredom—a temptation to which nobody was less exposed than the president of the Bout du Banc.

Particularly, too, by reason of the circle's literary production, which almost all found shelter in the Comte's *Œuvres badines*.<sup>1</sup> If to-day we turn over the pages of the costly edition, made for ladies' distraït hands, it will seem to us, despite the old-fashioned tone and lavender fragrance of this delicately coarse work, as

<sup>1</sup> Twelve volumes, 1787.



THE COMTE DE CAYLUS  
Engraving by C.-N. Cochin



though all the century's true talent had taken refuge in this cosy nook of literature. It is wantonness's bluest romanticism, which might take for motto Voltaire's lines :

Ah ! Datez du sein de Manon, . . .  
Mais vous baisez votre pupitre. . . .

In addition there is the blossoming fleshliness of the Renaissance, twin in sensual delectation to, let us say, La Pompadour's most unequivocal *parades*, or akin to the Rabelais of whom Galiani says, " Il ressemble au cul d'un pauvre homme, frais, dodu, sale et bien portant."

' Romantic wantonness ' describes that fairy-tale in Watteau's manner, Duclos's *Acajou et Zirphile* ; the paradisiac tale of education to knowledge through love, which omits not even that inevitable requisite, the chamber-pot. It is particularly romantic, too, in the unusual circumstances of its genesis in this circle.<sup>1</sup> The Swedish Ambassador at the Court of Versailles, Count Tessin, composed in his hours of freedom from social duties a little work of idlest fancy, *Jaunillane, ou l'Infante jaune*, and Boucher, painter of graceful nudity, enchanted the airy trifle into twelve whimsical pictures. Then the Count was recalled overnight to his own country to tutor the Crown Prince, and took the manuscript of his fairy-tale with him. It looked as though Boucher's pains had been wasted, and in his dejection the artist unburdened himself to one or two friends, such as Caylus and Duclos, whose sympathy had already helped him years ago when the lovely Rosine died from love of him. A competition is started in the Bout du Banc (as sixty years later in the Kleist circle over Debu-court's *Cruche cassée*), which results in the production of three *nugae*—two worthless efforts of the Abbé Voisenon and Duclos's affectedly witty fairy-tale. This is paid the honours of print, despite its strained preciousness that almost kills the fantastic pictures.

Next comes, romantic in subject as in local colour, that *Nouvelle espagnole* with which, in 1745, Mme de Graigny tried unsuccessfully, in spite of Duclos's support, to prove her right to membership of this disrespectful circle. Here wounded vanity would seem for once to have turned muse and inspired the injured lady then to the triumphs of her *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* and the drama

<sup>1</sup> 1774.



*Cénie*. Rousseau's *Reine fantasque*, also, who by her very title proclaims that she comes from Fairyland, may have been the price of his admission to the Bout du Banc (somewhere about 1755).

There, then, are one or two of the elegant and affected banalities wherein the social life and literary convention of the day found entry even into this unprejudiced circle. Naked as the muse of Rabelais, however, and, despite occasional Teniers-like plumpness, never-faillingly provocative, are the uncombed and unwashed hoyden-muses that romp through the rest of Caylus's collection, and whose paternity the Comte in sedate old age disowned, as Cardinal Bernis did his red-cheeked youthful indiscretions. But the Comte's disclaimers avail him not. *Pace Vadé* he is the author of the *Littérature poissarde* (*The Fishwives' Tale*), and in the *Étrennes de la Saint-Jean*, as in the *Écossaises, ou les Œufs de Pâques*,<sup>1</sup> in the *Recueil de ces messieurs et de ces dames*<sup>2</sup> and in the *Pot-pourri*,<sup>3</sup> he expresses his personality without restraint. Maurepas and Montesquieu, Vadé and the Comtesse Verrue, are supposed to have had a finger in the fun; Crébillon *filz*, Voisenon, and the satirist Chevrier seem not very far away; Duclos in a delicious criticism of the whole work tries to keep the observer's eye off himself—but without a doubt all the vital sap of this unique *kermesse* of carnality is extracted from the best talent of the Comte de Caylus.

The literary *genre*, of course, he did not invent—not even as far as France is concerned. Already the *Repues franches* of the last wandering scholar, François Villon (fifteenth century), have been roared through wine-reeking fume among the tap-room wenches of foul ale-houses. The "glutton," Théophile de Viau and Saint-Amant (seventeenth century) wallow at times in evil-smelling naturalness; Scarron puts vulgar intimacies on to the bigger stage of his *Roman comique*. It was left to the eighteenth century, however, in its surfeit of delicately dressed and seasoned literary dishes, to breed, particularly in distinguished circles, an insatiable appetite for this strong meat—much to the vexation of drawing-room literature's official guardians, Grimm and La Harpe, whose decree of excommunication against this *genre* naturally increased the fashionable taste for it all the more. It is with the name of Joseph Vadé that the rank growth of this literary weed is associated in the history of letters, and his burlesque epic in four

<sup>1</sup> 1739 ff.<sup>2</sup> 1745.<sup>3</sup> 1748.

cantos, *La Pipe cassée*, won him honour as a Teniers or Callot of poetry, or even the Corneille of Les Halles. This is certainly unjust to Caylus, for what of unfeigned naturalism finds place in his collection, given manifold form by the Comte himself, at least stands comparison with Vadé, if it did not actually serve him as model.

There is, for example, that delicate little masterpiece, the life-story of "Coachman William," told by himself, with the child-like pathos of the people, in the juiciest of stable jargon. As by a magic-lantern we have flashed before us the joys and sorrows of a *grisette*, the rascality and debauchery of financiers, the secrets of a fop's toilet and his art of love-making, and, lastly, a gallant *abbé's* heavenly and earthly raptures in the ear and bosom of his young penitent. In the *Aventures des bals de bois* and the *Fêtes roulantes* (Voisenon) the waves of lustiest popular merry-making break over the reader, on the occasion of the Dauphin's marriage in 1747. At the masked carnival, for instance, at the Porte Sainte-Antoine, a midwife makes the discovery that a young girl to whom she has rendered professional assistance in sudden travail is her own daughter. Horror at the disgrace causes the mother to fall down in a faint, thereby displaying to the bystanders her other face, "sur lequel elle avait oublié de mettre un masque." There is great hilarity, which waxes all the higher when three friends of the good lady's husband identify her by this very face; whereat there would have been a pretty score to settle with the irate cuckold, had not the wags pointed out the *peau de chagrin* colour of that part of the body in which, according to the midwife's own assertion, she had always experienced all her *chagrin*! Adventures, again, of the most picaresque sort fill with astringent drollery and in incomparable diversity the *Mémoires de l'Académie des Colporteurs*. There a legless cripple owes his introduction to the lucrative trade of peddling banned books to a saucy experience under his beloved's bed. Or the *colporteuse* Catherine Cuisson is in the habit of enacting with her male customers the contents of the *erotica* she purveys, and, caught one day *in flagranti* by a jealous countess, fools the furious lady with divine brazenness. Another member of this Académie goes so far as to study with scientific thoroughness the effects of the *Portier des Chartreux* on his fair clients. The *Étrennes de la Saint-Jean* are little stories of the Italian *novelle* type, proposed as presents suitable for distribution

among families on St John's Day, though naturally not for children. Next the tales of the *écosseuses* (women who shell peas at Les Halles) with graphic patois tear the last veils from the stark-naked physical. Finally the *Mémoires de l'Académie de Troyes* lose themselves in a hotch-potch of scatology and sexual aberration, though full to repulsiveness of details of the utmost interest for the historian of *mœurs*. By-pieces, also, such as the ironic proposal to set dialect on the throne in place of the senilely feeble literary language, no less compel attention than, for instance, the encomium *Sur l'Usage de battre sa maîtresse* is certain to provoke a laugh. If Lucian, says the writer, established five stages of *volupté* in love, "la vue, le simple toucher, le baiser, le toucher à volonté, enfin la possession totale de la personne aimée," the Académie proposes a far more sensitive scale of enhanced delight: "Aimer, plaie, jouir, battre, être battu."

The two *Recueils* and the *Pot-pourri* are a trifle fitter for the drawing-room, being more polished and less highly coloured. Set into a narrative framework, *contes* in Lafontaine's manner (e.g., "Il ne faut jamais compter sur rien") range themselves by the side of moral encomiums ("La sincérité est la plus sottise des vertus"); Piron's *Chien enragé* barks at the heels of an *Éloge de la paresse*; *petites histoires* like the piquant anecdote of the *Aimable indiscret* (who discloses to a company of seven ladies that he has enjoyed the favours of them all, without their learning of it from one another) snap their fingers under the nose of the most solemn disquisition on "Love and Female Education"; old bachelors are confirmed in their stiff-necked celibacy by a treatise proclaiming in diapason tones, "Le mariage est la fin du travestissement et de la comédie que l'on a jouée avant de se marier." Even an *Éloge de la médisance* and an *Apologie du babil des femmes* will not convert the lost-to-all-grace. Finally, in the *impayable* story of the husband who presumes (he tells his wife) that she will be unfaithful at least with a discreet *amant* who socially will spell advantage for him also, truest *dix-huitième* with graceful impertinence makes a face at posterity. Strict *coryphée*, however, of a part of this assorted company is a *Critique de l'ouvrage*, the precious strained wit and self-mockery of which were not unworthy of Duclos.

These, then, are the literary vestiges of that naughty *esprit* which, tossed into the air by the Comte de Caylus and sent flying

## THE BOUT DU BANC

to and fro among the members like a shuttlecock, used to fill the Bout du Banc with buffoons' grimaces and wanton laughter. The heart's rights, however, had a firm protectress, at whose beck all urchin impudence dived in an instant underneath the table: it was the actress, Jeanne-Françoise Quinault.

Nous vivons ordinairement plus avec les gens  
Qui nous plaisent, qu'avec ceux que nous estimons.

CRÉBILLON FILS

Nowhere, perhaps, does the unbridgeable self-contradiction of the gipsy-fickle eighteenth century strike the eye more palpably than in the social rating of the theatrical art and its disciples. On the one hand a contempt even for the dramatic poet which evokes from the caustic Galiani the remark that *filles de joie* would have to be ranked as priestesses of art before anyone would put up a statue to a tragedian; while the same disdain makes Chamfort, for instance, consider the theatre an immoral institution. On the other hand almost convulsive acclamation of this divine art, which is supplicated for deliverance from the deadly tedium of the everyday. To the former inhuman prejudice Molière, as also Adrienne Lecouvreur, Voltaire's muse, owes his final fate, and all along the eighteenth century crop up the grotesque and pedantic efforts of the play-folk to get rid of their civil ill-fame. The great Clairon, in particular, sets to in 1761 with an energetic campaign against the outlawry of her profession, bringing to bear even such juristic arguments as her own high social reputation. Vehemently the reception of players into ecclesiastical communion is demanded, and a storm raised against the legal ordinance by which entry into the mummers' ranks can bring disinheritance in its train. Literature seizes upon the subject for pathetic *nouvelles* and long-winded discussions in the memoirs of the time, and even the *philosophes* will not stand aside in the fight for the good cause, and point satirically to the reputation of this profession in England and Italy. All this agitation is carried on in France, as also, for instance, in Germany, for a long time in vain—and to no real purpose. For never at any period before or since has the great actor in more godlike manner had the people prostrate at his feet, never has the actress sat more securely on the throne of fashion and immorals. “La condition des comédiens était infâme chez

les Romains, et honorable chez les Grecs: Qu'est-elle chez nous? On pense d'eux comme les Romains, on vit avec eux comme les Grecs."<sup>1</sup> The eighteenth century is pre-eminent in placing in the radiance of the footlights a line of classical courtesans in the grand manner. All the romance of this most unreal of callings seems incarnate in Mlle d'Aubigny, heroine of Gautier's *Mlle de Maupin*, whose hermaphrodite career outstrips the poet's wildest imagination. The singer Marie Fel flits like a smile across the ageing features of her century. The *diable au corps*, Sophie Arnould, pulls the most solemn company of poets and philosophers by the nose and peruke into her circle. Thalia Clairon indignantly lays down her sceptre because the critic Fréron has dared to touch the hem of her mantle, and the Minister Choiseul is able to appease the tyrant only by pointing to his own political mumming, which hourly renders him the defenceless object of similar attacks. To pass this same Clairon a book, the Duchesse de la Vallière jumps up from her seat with such energetic eagerness to be of service that she falls down and has to be carried away covered with blood. Tired of being denied by a duchess whose *amant* he is, the actor Baron comes in one fine day when she is with her intimate friends. "Monsieur, que venez-vous chercher ici?" haughtily demands the furious *belle*. "Mon bonnet de nuit," is his tranquil reply. For the name of the Chevalier de Fleury, whom she marries, the *danseuse* Defresne pays a thousand francs a year to this forerunner of modern English and French grandees. "Je ne veux pas de Guéménée dans ma famille!" the dancer Vestris bluntly tells his son, who is always running into debt, at the moment when the notorious bankruptcy of the princely house of Guéménée is all the talk of Paris. Nay, on one occasion when La Guimard breaks her foot her admirers have a Mass said in Notre-Dame for this foot "dont les entrechats damnaient tant de monde." More, the actresses of this time can afford even the luxury of virtue and the smarts of true love, so firmly established is their material weal.

In this discrepant world Mlle Quinault had had the art to win that unique reputation that soon made her the emotional centre of one of the liveliest and wittiest circles of her time. She came of a dynastic theatrical family whose fame filled the annals of the eighteenth century. Her brother, Quinault-Dufresne, was spoilt

<sup>1</sup> La Bruyère.



*Prophétie complie.*

Mlle CLAIRON  
 (copy after B. Gravelot)



enough to wish to play Voltaire's *Zaïre*, *pace* the poet, according to his own ideas. His exit from the stage in February 1767, at the summit of his powers, wrung a word of reluctant recognition even from the supercilious Grimm, and the fact that the beautiful and gifted Mlle Gautier became a Carmelite nun on his account certainly did no harm to the reputation his private qualities enjoyed among the ladies.

The second of his three sisters, Françoise, married her colleague Denesle, was ravishing in comic *rôles*, and passed unexpectedly from the stage by her death in 1713 at the age of twenty-five. Socially, again, the eldest of the girls, Marie-Anne, nicknamed La Mignonne, early and energetically wrought herself an unassailable position. Dainty as a Sèvres doll, and blessed with the most delicate bosom that the *amateurs* of the time could cover with kisses, she glided from the stage into the bed of the financier Samuel Bernard, to forget her quarrel with the old Jew in the arms of the Marquis de Nesle. She is said to have procured the *maladie antisociale* to the Duc de Chartres, father of Philippe Égalité, as also the necessity for withdrawing herself into the gloom of the Convent of Sainte-Genève to recuperate from worldly pleasures. All these vicissitudes, however, caused her to ripen to such a charm of personality that the Duc de Nevers laid at her feet first his social influence and finally even his title. In their princely residence in the old Louvre there thronged from 1750 onward the most brilliant cavaliers of the Court, the most resounding names in art and science; honours otherwise reserved only for men rained down upon her, and when in 1791, nearly a hundred years old, she made her final exit from the stage, the Marquise de Créqui, buffoon to the *noblesse*, recorded in her diary with envenomed jealousy that the whole Court had followed the *comédienne* to the grave, as though she were one of their own.

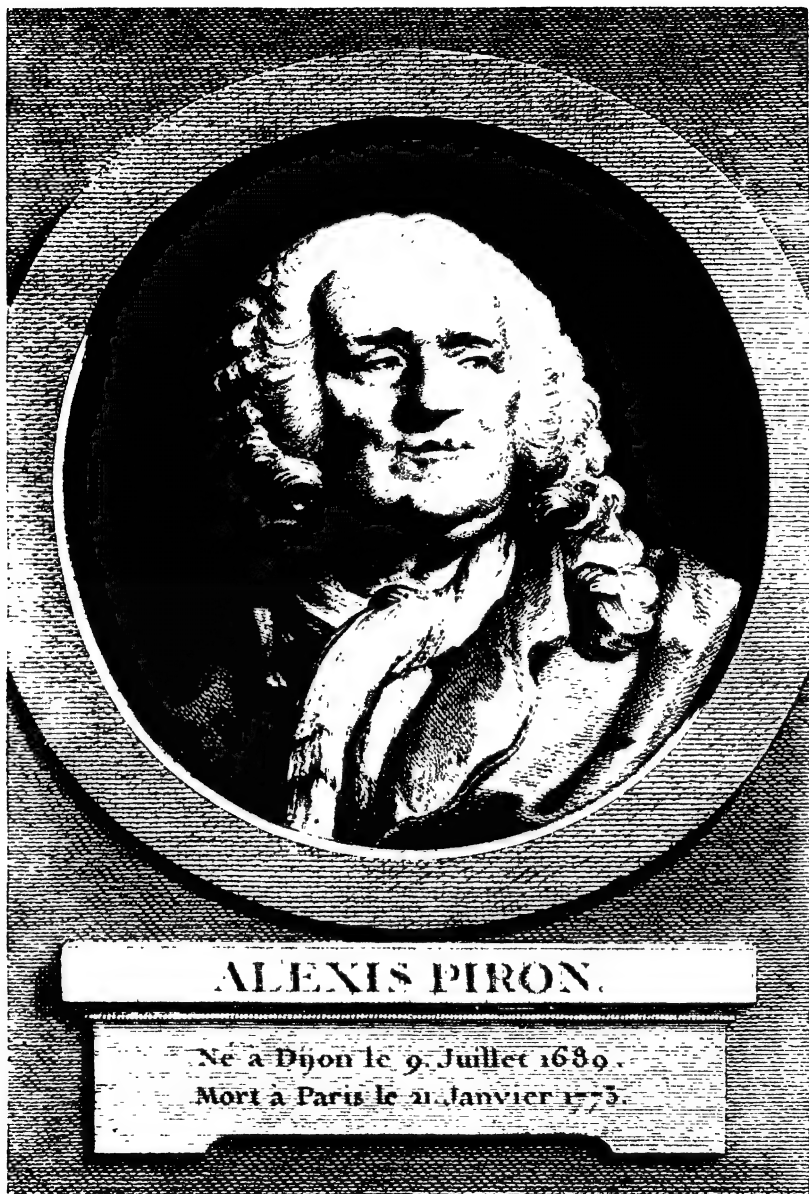
Less widely, but therefore so much the deeper, in the life of intellectual France extended the influence of Jeanne-Françoise (known as Mlle Quinault la Cadette).<sup>1</sup> Hardly had she tripped on to the boards of the Comédie before, already playing *soubrette*, she had driven all rivals into secondary *rôles*. Her twinklingly witty acting, the sauciness with which she showered impromptu fancies into the packed house like a rain of sparks, released even such elementary ravishment as her cat-velvet eyes, sly, boyish face,

<sup>1</sup> 1699-1783.



and an adorable pair of tiny feet, sent thrills through connoisseurs old and young. Even stage writers, however, listened to her suggestions as inspirations of Nature. La Chaussée was shown by her how the *Préjugé à la mode* of the absurdity of married love could be tackled as a play. For no less a writer than Voltaire she brings away from a penny-gaff performance at the Foire Saint-Germain the subject for his *Enfant prodigue*,<sup>1</sup> and with intense interest and extravagant thanks the poet follows from Cirey the trouble his "Thalie" is taking over their joint work. "Il n'y a rien à risquer, Mademoiselle, si vous vous chargez de l'ouvrage. C'est à vous à nourrir l'enfant que je vous ai fait," he writes in March 1736, and in a letter of November 1738 makes the profound bow: "On vous écrit souvent, Mademoiselle, comme à l'arbitre du bon goût, et à la personne de France qui juge le mieux des ouvrages d'esprit." As human being, however, and woman, La Quinault first began really to express herself when, in 1730, she took her place by the side of Caylus in the leadership of the Bout du Banc. And if, to adapt a famous *mot* from Laborde's *Pensées*, at the age of twenty she only let love be extorted from her, as a woman of thirty she lavished it with full hands on all around her. It is a calumny, however, on the part of the envious outsider Grimm when he sneers that she made her social position cost her more battles than his dictatorship did Cromwell, for otherwise there is unanimity of praise for the delicate and gentle tact, the captivating charm, with which La Quinault nevertheless tightly held the reins. In her modest dwelling in the Rue d'Anjou-Dauphine the coarse-minded Caylus became her bashful adorer, and the painter Coypel shook off the irksomeness of his Court office when she seized him endearingly under the chin and coaxed, "Qu'as-tu donc, mon Quoy?" Famous is the scene where the Minister d'Argenson conducts the companion of his sunniest hours from his audience chamber on his arm, and in front of the throng of place-seekers takes leave of her with a kiss. A chevalier of the Order of St Louis approaches the fortunate woman and begs her to exert her influence in such high quarters on his behalf; whereupon La Quinault, already on the point of going, turns and before all eyes embraces him with the words, "Monsieur, je ne puis mieux faire pour vous que de vous rendre sur-le-champ ce que le ministre m'a donné." From his Italian exile Duclos, in April 1767, still charges his faithful Abeille

<sup>1</sup> 1735.



*Decouvert et Gravé par Aug. de St. Aubin d'après le Buste en Marbre  
fait par S. J. Goussier placé dans le Foyer de la Comédie Française, en 1785*

ALEXIS PIRON  
Engraving by A. de Saint-Aubin



with words of fairest remembrance to the old lady, and leaves her 10,000 livres in his will. The aged d'Alembert himself, after the death of La Lespinasse and Mme Geoffrin, rested his weary limbs and cheered his chilling heart in the cosy warmth of this artistic home, acted as La Quinault's literary adviser, and helped her, contrarily to her confessor's zeal for souls, to pass away peacefully into eternity.

Most touching of all her relations, however, and richest in give and take, was that with the poet Alexis Piron. Escaping after a harsh youth from the rod of his father, an apothecary in Dijon, the man of thirty ran away to a life of careless vagabondage in Paris. His bawdy plays, written to keep body and soul together, and yet turned out off-handedly with a laugh, went the round of suburban stages and annual fairs until La Quinault with firm hand rescued him, now nearly forty, from his degrading surroundings, and in 1728 put his *Fils ingrats* behind the footlights of the Comédie Française. From this time onward she walked beside him like his good genius. She woke the Marquis de Lassay's interest in her *protégé*, and thus relieved the poet of his most pressing financial worries. Then, on the country estate of their common patron, the Comte de Livry, the pair dreamed a fairy-tale of secret love's felicity, climbed the trees of the league-wide park, or filled the castle's famous dining-room, wherein the most exquisite *gourmets* of France forgathered, with laughter and the jingling verses of the *Métromanie*. From Fontainebleau again, where in 1730, on the *château* stage, La Quinault shortened the intervals between the young Louis XV's nights of *volupté*, she wrote Piron a series of letters that may keep company with the tenderest things in the love literature of all periods. There she pets him because he has managed to curb his coarse lasciviousness in her presence. Another letter jokes about the *fuyarderie* with which he strove to escape from his guardian angel. And yet, she affirms, she knows him better than he knows himself: "La Tonton éloignée, le Piron reparaît." In contrast with the passionate gesture of the century's *grandes amoureuses*, the child of the people here tests her lover's heart as Gretchen does in *Faust* with the flower:

Je ne veux pas finir sans vous demander comment vous m'aimez. Si vous êtes Binbin,<sup>1</sup> vous répondrez: De tout mon cœur.—Où est-il,

<sup>1</sup> A Burgundian term of endearment.

votre cœur?—Il est dans mon côté.—Qui l'y a mis?—C'est le petit Jésus.—Avec toute votre science sur la Bible, vous voyez que je suis obligée de vous apprendre votre catéchisme.

And in the middle of a lovers' quarrel the quivering woman writes from her heart the delicious words: " Je me garderai bien de finir ma lettre par un blasphème aussi abominable que le mot : adieu ! " And: " Où voulez-vous aller pour être mieux senti ? " Her softening influence had its most direct effect, however, when her unruly lover wished to play the rôle of sheer nature at the Bout du Banc. There the massively built man sits among yelping literary folk, tipsy *grands seigneurs*, and laced-up little ladies. In his wine-flushed face the wide nostrils swell with sensuality, the eyes light up in the fire of inspiration, and another moment will produce a monstrous obscenity from the already half-opened mouth—when from the end of the table a dainty little finger is raised, two velvet eyes look wheedlingly into his, and the giant, already rising to his feet, sinks back into his chair with a sigh, with a sigh of relief, for the big child has felt the power of his good angel. One or two delicate little poems, such as the allegorical fable *L'Ours et l'Hermine*, bear appropriate witness to his gratitude.

This affair of the heart with Piron remained the sole romance in La Quinault's life. Exquisite *savoir-vivre*, however, and smiling wisdom drew the friends of bygone days back to the old lady again and again, even when the Bout du Banc had been broken up by the philosophic wrangle of Diderot, Grimm, and Rousseau, the fights about the Comtesse d'Houdetot between the rivals Saint-Lambert and Jean-Jacques, and Duclos's morose grudge against Mme d'Épinay, and Mlle Quinault herself had fled to the rural peace of Saint-Germain-en-Laye. Seldom again did she set foot in ever more and more threateningly upheaving Paris, unless perhaps the artistically minded La Reynière family invited her to be the tutelary spirit of their home parties. On these occasions young Grimod was allowed to sit on the old lady's knee and gaze with shining eyes into the lost fairyland of stage glamour her tales revealed to him. In solitude otherwise, albeit surrounded by serene affection, she wrapped herself closer and closer in her need of tranquillity. One morning she was found with face carefully painted, pink ribbons wound into her *coiffure*, lying in bed. To the surprised inquiry as to what this sudden coquetry might betoken she replied smilingly, " I've made myself so beautiful because to-day





I have to meet Death." Friend d'Alembert must keep the Church night-birds from her bed, and so she passed away, with greater *insouciance* than many of the philosophers who had taught her to greet death as life's completion.

In her memoirs Mme d'Épinay sketches with the virtuosity of a Moreau le Jeune or a Carmontelle a scene at Mlle Quinault's (round about 1750) in which life in full spate threatens to burst all the dikes of morality. It is an intellectual orgy in the manner of the actor Lekain's *soirées*, peer to Mme de Genlis's Adam and Eve balls in the palace of the Duc d'Orléans, and in its own way no less colourful than the *atelier* parties of the woman painter Vigée-Lebrun. The actors are Duclos, a peculiarly sharp portrait elaborated with the eye of hate; the Prince de Beauvau, who has come to recuperate in this circle from the privations of a model marriage; Saint-Lambert, still warm from the embraces of the Marquise de Boufflers, whom he has stolen from Papa Stanislas Leszczynski, and enhaloed by his tragic love for the 'divine' Émilie du Châtelet, Voltaire's tenth muse. His champagne rhapsody on the natural bridal night has the air of rising from the ecstasy of his burgeoning *liaison* with the Comtesse d'Houdetot. Of women, besides Mlle Quinault, who now holds the mettlesome Duclos in her reins here as in earlier days she held Piron, there is only Mme d'Épinay, but just initiated and yet anxious, with ashamed salacity and burning cheeks, to keep the conversation in its slippery channel. The subject of the dramatically excited discussion, which for directness rivals the most sparkling word-fence in *Le Neveu de Rameau*, is that *naturel* which Rousseau's famous treatises on civilization flung like a firebrand into over-refined Society, and which Diderot and Saint-Lambert will later fan into an endlessly smouldering glow.

The meal is over, dessert and wine stand before the guests, and Mlle Quinault has beckoned her twelve-year-old niece Olympe to retire. "For," she replies to Mme d'Épinay's compassionate question, "we've inflicted enough constraint on ourselves on the little chick's account. Just look how the tender Arbassan, our friend Duclos there, is already pining to plant his elbows on the table and come out with the most impossible remarks! A nice howdy-do it would have been if the little thing had stayed!"



"I don't understand how you can speak in such a way," remonstrates the person attacked. "If you had only let me go on, what shall we wager that the child would have understood better than . . ."

"Oh, that I don't doubt," laughs La Quinault. "But the time has passed. unfortunately, when everything could be called by its proper name, and youth can never begin too soon to practise the language of polite society."

DUCLOS. What in that case becomes of Nature? She has the right to survive.

Mlle QUINAULT. There we have it! Nature! As if naked Nature had not always worked, from olden times onward, in the veil of modesty.

DUCLOS. Not in what nowadays goes by that name. It is well enough known that among many savage peoples the women go naked until puberty; and it has never entered the head of one of them to blush about it.

Mlle QUINAULT. Granted! Nevertheless, I'm convinced that human beings have the seed of shame in them.

SAINT-LAMBERT. That's my belief also. And time has developed this germ. Chastity, jealousy, the selfishness of *volupté*, all must have contributed.

DUCLOS. And education then superimposed its chief purpose—what is so beautifully and so truly called *la bienséance*.

THE PRINCE. But once upon a time, at least, all people, not only savages, went about stark naked.

DUCLOS. Of course! Male and female pell-mell, well-fed, coddled, fat-cheeked, the innocent cherubs. Here's to their health!

Mlle QUINAULT *pours out a glass of wine and sings*:

Il t'en revient encore une image agréable  
Qui te plaît plus que tu ne veux.

To be sure, the only garment Mother Nature has given us is that which fits everywhere without a crease.

DUCLOS. Damnation to the fool who first took into his head to wear another one over it!

Mlle QUINAULT. It was certainly some hunchbacked dwarf, wizened and bandy-legged; for your pretty folk display what they have.

SAINT-LAMBERT. Be that as it may, you will concede me that people know no shame when by themselves.

## THE BOUT DU BANC

MME D'ÉPINAY. Is that really so certain, Monsieur le Marquis? I for my part have had the opposite experience.

SAINT-LAMBERT. Yes, then you have brought to your privacy a prejudice acquired in the company of other people, dear lady. Just test, though, for once, how shame dwindles with habit.

DUCLOS. My own view entirely. I can assure you that I'm not the least bit embarrassed when I'm by myself.

Mlle QUINAULT. Only when you're by yourself? Less than ever when there's anyone looking at you! Duclos and bashfulness! Ha, ha, ha!

DUCLOS. I see nothing there to laugh at. Would you, for instance, on a hot night meditate a long time whether to kick coverlet and chemise to the foot of the bed? Where to, then, the luxury of shame, which one only pins to one's body in the morning?

Mlle QUINAULT. Ah, yes, of that kind of virtues the world is, alas, only too full.

THE PRINCE. And they change with country, customs, and climate. Wickedness, however, which is recorded in the book of universal morality, remains wicked everywhere—to-day as ten thousand years ago.

SAINT-LAMBERT. This world morality alone, however, is holy and eternal.

DUCLOS. Order gave it birth, and reason suckled it.

SAINT-LAMBERT. In it the will of the race reaches full expression.

DUCLOS. Dear friends, let us sum up: It is the eternal commandment of pleasure, pain, and necessity.

Mlle QUINAULT. Well said for once, Duclos! You sometimes speak just like a book. To your good health!

DUCLOS. If I could transport myself back to the beginning of things . . .

MME D'ÉPINAY. Well?

DUCLOS. Then I should see the human race, naked as worms, crawling over the earth. . . .

Mlle QUINAULT. The thought seems to please you greatly that you return to it so often.

DUCLOS. That I'm far from denying. What I meant to say was that the first man to pull a beast's pelt over his nudity did so in order to keep warm.

MME D'ÉPINAY. And why not because he was ashamed?

DUCLOS. Ashamed? On account of his human form?

THE PRINCE. And yet it can't be denied that Nature herself, at a fixed age, seems, as if in shame, to spread a veil over certain parts of the body.

Mlle QUINAULT. But, gentlemen, who will be so scientific !

SAINT-LAMBERT. Were that really Nature's intention she would not put it off so long. Furthermore, she also hides places where there's nothing to hide.

DUCCLOS. *Saprelotte* ! If people went about naked, the arms, the tousled mops, there'd be to see ! To say nothing at all about the rest !

Mlle QUINAULT. Perhaps people wouldn't then have been at such pains to deform their bodies. And people would have become better, too.

Mme d'ÉPINAY. All very fine ; but I can't separate the idea of modesty from the sentiment of shame.

THE PRINCE. Yes, but what do you understand by sentiment of shame, dear lady ?

Mme d'ÉPINAY. I don't know how I should put it ; only of this I'm sure, that every time I feel ashamed I'm ready to sink into the ground for vexation with myself.

SAINT-LAMBERT. Excellent, dear madam ! This vexation only proves, however, that you are conscious of some defect. If this awareness is confined to yourself, the feeling of shame will be of short duration. It is long and devouring, though, if others know about your fault.

Mme d'ÉPINAY. Why, then, do I feel relieved when I've confessed my fault ?

SAINT-LAMBERT. Pride in your own confession helps you. Had somebody else found out your secret, you would certainly be unable to look them in the face.

DUCCLOS. Hence I, for example, gladly own up to all my defects.

Mlle QUINAULT. Yes, when you see that it wouldn't be a bit of use to deny them.

THE PRINCE. Besides, there are faults and faults. A fault acknowledged is already next door to a virtue. Confession, therefore, stands to gain more than it loses. . . .

Mme d'ÉPINAY. Granted, then, that human beings can go naked without blushing. But that would mean granting everything.

DUCCLOS. For example, the wholesome truth that, but for the high wisdom of a mother's teaching, but for a nurse's prudish

sermons, even you, fair lady, would venture Eve-wise among your fellows without giving it a thought.

THE PRINCE. Very just ! And it is really a matter for laughter that it is only in human society that we are shy of obeying natural instinct.

Mlle QUINAULT. I should like to know, moreover, whether all that which wakes in us such beautiful and such ugly feelings because it is kept out of sight would not leave us completely cold if it lay open to the day. I believe the like of this has happened.

DUCLOS. Do you believe that in such a case the sense of touch, also, would lose its rights ?

SAINT-LAMBERT, *holding out his glass in ecstasy to Mlle Quinault*. A glass of champagne, I pray you, most gracious hostess. Permit me, ladies and gentlemen, to draw you a picture of the sweetest human relation, showing how, rid of all constraint, it could become also the solemnest. Here the lawgivers are found completely wanting. Wherefore do youths and maidens not display themselves to one another naked ? Wherefore does the priest not lead the newly married pair, in full sight of the people, to a raised couch, where underneath a wide veil the sacrifice shall fall. The sweetest perfumes should float about the twain, the bride's sighs be lost in ethereal music, while hymns of exalted *volupté* invoke the gods' protection for the life that shall be born out of this embrace. Then would the bride, instead of exhausting herself in foolish shame and senseless tears, thrill with a mother's reverence for the child she will carry beneath her heart.

Mlle QUINAULT. Hail to our Pindar ! Hail to our Anacreon !

THE PRINCE. Yes, but seriously, how, pray, may it have come about that publicity is shunned for life's most natural, urgent, and universal activity ?

DUCLOS. I will tell you. The appeasement of sexual craving is a sort of theft. The luster carries off the woman of his desire as the dog that has snatched a bone does not let it out of his jaws until he can gnaw it in a corner. Nay, even while he feeds he turns his head from side to side and snarls, that nobody may wrest his prize from him. You see, jealousy is the final basis of all modesty.

SAINT-LAMBERT. It must be confessed that Nature, though usually so clear-sighted, is at other times no less limited.

Mlle QUINAULT. A new truth ! That must be celebrated. Your health, gentlemen !

DUCLOS *drinks three glasses of champagne one after the other. As a result he more and more loses control over his thoughts and words.*

THE PRINCE. By your leave, ladies and gentlemen, there are, though, other of life's activities, of just as private a nature, which have in good sooth nothing to do with jealousy.

DUCLOS. Damn it, he's right about that ! And whoever in such matters sacrifices *amour-propre* to his convenience is called shameless. To be sure, one often does well to hide oneself, for the attendant circumstances——

MLLE QUINAULT. Will you be quiet, Duclos ! You've an unblushing shockingness. . . .

DUCLOS. But devil take it, how so ? What I'm saying is the most natural thing in the world. . . .

SAINT-LAMBERT. Meanwhile you'll admit, most gracious lady, that one must be corrupt in order to appreciate innocence properly.

DUCLOS. And shameless, if one wants to feel what modesty is.

MLLE QUINAULT. Ah ! that's why you hold forth about it like a book ! No, dear Duclos, moderate your language, or we'll talk about something else.

MME D'ÉPINAY. In spite of all the new and clever things we've heard, I should like to abide by the belief that there's a shy modesty that comes of innocence and delicacy of feeling.

SAINT-LAMBERT. In that, too, you are right, dear madam. And this modesty is like a fair mirror, which one shrinks from tarnishing even by a breath.

Thus this scene, throughout masculine and downright, dies away on a note of tender feminine feeling worthy of the century that assembled all manly deeds, exercise of war, and works of peace, like so many lightly spun threads in the weak hands of women.



## MME DE TENCIN



ATTEMPTING to follow step by step Duclos's further upward progress through the social life of the eighteenth century would mean losing oneself in the history of all the *salons* of those days. Already in the intimate circle of Mme de Staal-Delaunay (Regency period) the youth wins his spurs as man of the world. It is, however, the manly way this lady stands up for her mistress, the Duchesse du Maine, in the Cellamare Plot against the Regent that teaches the future moralist how in the midst of perfidy something of loyalty can assert itself; and that even in an age of the most striking sexual pleasure love is blind must be proved to the wonderment of the student of mankind by Mme Delaunay's *affaire de cœur* with the less than commonplace Chevalier de Ménil. Into the sanctuary of Versailles, again, and directly to La Pompadour (and the economist Quesnay) Duclos is introduced through the social gatherings at her relative's, the beautiful and clever Mme de Marchais. This lady, born, as daughter of the money magnate Laborde, of the most cultivated wealth, then married to the *châtelain* of the Louvre, gathered round her also, until a high old age, all the period's social brilliance—indeed, made her dwelling in the old royal palace an antechamber to the Académie. Intimate philosophical and literary company, on the other hand, the already famous author of the *Considérations* found and dominated at the house of the Comte d'Argental, Voltaire's factotum, in the *salon* of Mme de Graigny, whose literary conscience Duclos had become since the artistic orgy of the Bout du Banc, and at the high school of moralistic ambition, in the circle of a Mme Necker. To be sure, on the stage of vanities and sycophancy *chez* Mmes du Deffand and Geoffrin the pose of frankness assumed by the plebeian Duclos can have had no lasting effect, as also this same inconsiderate candour soon cost him the hospitality of Helvétius and Holbach,

the patrons of the *philosophes*. To make up for that, however, his ready wit flashed in word-fence with the actress Sophie Arnould, and here he may have gathered a rich yield for the collection of anecdotes in his *Mémoires secrets*.

All this was but the success or setback of the moment. To deeper and more permanent effect, on the contrary, Duclos's life prospered in the house of Mme de Tencin, then, in a mighty advance beyond the ducal family of the Brancas, at the royal court of La Pompadour, finally descending, in the fight over Mme d'Épinay, to mere humanity, and thereat going to pieces.

Among the characters of the eighteenth century who most distinctively display their epoch's Janus face, amorality and intelligence, stands uppermost Claudine Alexandrine Guérin de Tencin. In 1714, at the age of thirty-two, she cast aside the habit of the Grenoble convent she had been forced to enter and fled to Paris, to drown her long-unquenched senses in the turbid flood of wildest pleasure. Her enemies whispered of her behind her back as a *fille publique*. Certain it is, however, that, for all her self-oblivion, her striking appearance, her lovely, slim figure, will-o'-the-wisp eyes, and witty mouth—aye, and the pure line of a much-admired bosom—kept all their youthful freshness. Then, when in 1717, as the result of a passionate *liaison* with the Chevalier Destouches, she brought into the world and abandoned to its fate a child, who afterward, as Lerond d'Alembert, was to disavow his unnatural mother, she must have blossomed to a yet riper beauty. Now first begins her 'political' love-life, to which she sacrificed even her discreet retreat in the house of her sister, Mme Ferriol. For here meanwhile that enigmatic child Mlle Aissé, the Circassian girl whom the Comte de Ferriol, French Ambassador at the Porte, had borne off in selfish pity from the Bosphorus to Paris and transplanted into his sister-in-law's home, had been unfolding to exotic charm. Ferriol's motive revealed itself as mere sensual satisfaction, for both he and, afterward, the Regent sank upon their knees in vain supplication before the virginity of this woman's soul, before the dusky glance of her long-silk-lashed eyes, her strange, small face, whiteness breathed upon by gold, and the flowing lines of her lissom figure—while already the threads had begun to spin themselves for her unique love-knot with the Chevalier d'Aydie, in

which the true sentiment of the whole century seems to have taken refuge, and which has achieved eternal form in the girl's affecting correspondence with Mme Caladrini. Mme de Tencin without fuss or envy yields her innocent rival the field, for already she has guided the Regent's brutal desires toward herself in a scene that Duclos whispers into our ear with faunish relish. Standing on a pedestal, naked as the goddess of love, she awaits the Prince in the antechamber to his bedroom, and when, heavy with wine and lust, he gropes his way in she sinks graciously into his surprised arms. So begins, then, that epic of debauchery which in breadth and fullness of incident has its equal only at the Court of Sardapalus and in Messalina's Rome. For the midnight revels in the Palais-Royal, from which the Prince more than once tottered back to his rooms with distracted wits, led by white-haired valets shaking their heads, it was La Tencin who furnished materials and *comparserie*. For the naked *fêtes* at Saint-Cloud she fishes out from the buried ordure of antiquity fabulous enormities, which are brought to life and enacted before the Prince's flickering senses. In addition there are her backstairs intrigue with the Cardinal Dubois; the far-resounding scandal of La Fresnaye's suicide in the lady's house, followed by detention in the Bastille and awkward legal proceedings; her Amazonian relations with the Duc de Richelieu, in which sureness of purpose and abysmal amorality self-awarely display themselves. All this, however, ill-fame, humiliation, gutter abuse, but nourishes the one genuine passion that rules this woman to the marrow, gnawing ambition for her beloved brother, later Cardinal Tencin. It is true that once, when she had begun to edge over imperceptibly from sweet dalliance into politics, the Regent brusquely loosed himself from her embrace and coldly declared "qu'il n'aimait pas les filles qui parlent d'affaires entre deux draps." But with Dubois she saw through the lackey's soul into the weightiest State secrets, and in the person of Richelieu she sat even in the grand council of the King. To advance her brother, whom even shameless simony and perjury in the Law affair had not been able to raise to the hoped-for honours, she spun with a witch's hand the threads that pulled Louis XV out of the arms of his young wife into the bed of de Mailly, Vintimille, and La Tournelle. The King, however, was as little prevented by the feeling, "Cette femme me donne la chair de poule," from making further use of her as her friends were untrue to her, because they



were convinced "que si elle avait un intérêt à les empoisonner, elle choisirait le poison le plus doux." And while Pope Innocent XIII is said to have died of the political compulsion of summoning that *par nobile fratrum*, Dubois and Tencin, to the College of Cardinals, the escaped nun Tencin engaged from her *salon* throne in animated correspondence with Benedict XIV. Thus this rare woman documents the astonishing double-sidedness of her character, of which, as she grew older, it was more and more the charming human side, ripe experience, readiness to help, and literary inclinations, that were to find expression in her famous *salon*.

Séjour divin, réduit céleste, . . .  
 Dans lequel être admis vaut mieux  
 Que de posséder tout le reste.

PIRON

In her cosy home in the Rue Saint-Honoré, where after her departure from the Maison Ferriol her secret love affairs had hidden themselves from the world, Mme de Tencin had soon made also a simple but distinguished setting for one of the liveliest intellectual circles of the time. As the visitor entered the house precincts from the street a commodious courtyard, bordered by domestic offices, led to the main building. In the roomy hall almost the only decoration was the beautifully curved staircase, at the foot of which opened the reception-room. There white and gold prevailed, and would have commanded particular admiration if over fireplace, and on little tables and Japanese lacquer stands, extravagant Chinese porcelain figures had not been set down to dance and divert. In the dining-room close by, again, scarcely anything in the way of show furniture distracted attention from the serious business of eating. On the other hand, in the bedroom of the mistress of the house (on the other side of the staircase) feminine snugness found full expression. *Adoucissement* everywhere, soft carpets, the walls hung with tapestries, rich Gobelins on the stuffed easy-chairs and billowing curtains round woman's sanctuary. All this *mondaine* lady's care, however, had been lavished on her cosy corner. Round the graceful curve of dressing-table and mirror half a dozen armchairs awaited their mistress's *levée*, a coquettish little fireplace invited a confidential tone, and



MME DE TENCIN  
 Engraving after F. de Tro  
 National Library Vienna



soft damask hangings before the window warded off from this secluded nest the impertinent clamour of the street. A folding door, lastly, shielded from sight the little room where copper tubs daily welcomed the mistress of the house to her morning bath.

Into this unpretentious frame, then, fitted the brilliant picture of one of the eighteenth century's first (in point of time) and most effectual *salons*. Mme de Tencin was at home there especially on Tuesdays, at any hour of the day. In the morning a circle of intimate friends gathered round her half-disclosed charms at the dressing-table, while the evening was reserved for more ceremonious receptions at dinner or in the drawing-room. Thus it was, above all, in the first stages, when Mme de Tencin, still sure of her youthful fascination, continued to bind the flock of her admirers to her, without yielding anything, and philosophy and politics had not yet driven out vanity from this sanctum of femininity, as gradually and finally happened after the *Law débâcle*. Then Circe became sibyl and summoned round her a court of "Seven Sages," Fontenelle as *coryphée*. The latter had resolved at the age of fifty to give woman for the future only Platonic service, that he might be able with continued vigour to spend the revenues of his literary fame peacefully in the *salons*. This he did with Olympian equanimity at Mme de Lambert's, whose circle carried on into the eighteenth century the *précieux* tradition of the Hôtel de Rambouillet. As "Lambertiste" he then, after La Lambert's death, established a snug corner for himself at Mme de Tencin's, toying gracefully with feminine beauty, thoughts, and little sentiments with such *insouciance* that the mistress of the house once laid her hand, half shocked, upon his heart and said, "Ce n'est pas un cœur que vous avez là, c'est de la cervelle." Thus his enemies could say behind his back that he had loved nobody, so as to be thereby more lovable in Society, and the women complained that he asked of them nothing but the beauty of a picture or statue. As circumspectly weighed out as his sentiment was his tentative *esprit*. Once he had given his opinion not even the most passionate opposition could force him into justifying it, and he brushed away all objections with a graceful turn of thought. As an inimitable example of this treacherous charm his remark about the actress Dumesnil when she was playing in Voltaire's *Mérope* flew from *salon* to *salon*: "Les représentations de Mérope ont fait grand honneur à Voltaire, et l'impression à la Dumesnil." Typical, too, was his

art of listening, his trick of praising in others the *esprit* he himself had lent them—nay, of continuing to agree with people while with imperceptible irony he had already put them right. Equally removed from burning genius and wasting envy, from hate and love, from cankering pain and exhausting pleasure, he stood there, this Mr Worldly Wiseman, amid the more and more tempestuously surging society of the eighteenth century like a monument of balanced *savoir-vivre*, a model to some, to others strangely alien and chilling. He kept the same smiling equanimity as in life, however, when face to face with last things. Many of his friends he saw pass away, including Mme de Tencin, and when the news of her death was broken to him the old man of ninety had the strength only to say, “Eh bien, j’irai dîner chez la Geoffrin !” One day the hundred-year-old Mme Grimaud whispered to her fellow ancient with wrinkled charm that Providence seemed to have forgotten them both down there on earth. “*Chut !*” said he, slyly, and put his finger to his lip. And even at the moment of dissolution his last sentiment about life was “Une grande impossibilité d’être.”

The second of the seven sages was Marivaux, who in the fourth part of his *Vie de Marianne* placed the mistress of the house (as “Mme Dorsin”) in the setting of his *marivaudage* and her *salon*. His patroness repaid her friend by pushing him in 1742, with Richelieu’s support, into the Académie in front of Voltaire.

Esteemed physicist and Hellenist, passable musician and Society man all rolled into one, came Dortous de Mairan as third among the seven. Next Mirabaud, editor of Tasso and member of the Académie, owes his place near La Tencin’s heart less to literary reputation than to widely extensive reading and accompanying enthusiasm. The numismatist de Boze and the fashionable physician Astruc join this witenagemot of sages as embodiments of caution and urbanity.

Lastly, to complete the sacred number, comes the twenty-nine-year-old Duclos, who but a short while ago had been living life to the full in drinking and wenching, determined to take the golden yoke of literary fame upon his shoulders as late as possible, and convinced, like Fontenelle, that never yet did a book give its author as much pleasure as sorrow. It was Fontenelle himself, however, who discovered the young fellow in a literary coffee-house, and after a vehement and graceful exchange of opinions forced him to give his impromptu wit more permanent form. Thus, for this once, he



FONTENELLE  
Engraving after H. Rigaud



played the part of Necessity, who, as in the case of Montesquieu and Buffon, was so often the muse that presided over Duclos's work. Then Fontenelle brought his impetuous young friend to the high school of mundane observation at Mme de Tencin's. Here the social critic will get the originals for his *romans* and the *Considérations*, the *bel esprit* will have to acknowledge of his hostess, "On ne peut pas avoir plus d'esprit; elle avait toujours celui de la personne à qui elle avait affaire." From her own life and from the career of her brother the Cardinal the mistress of the house, asked and unasked, will supply the historian with valuable anecdotes—nay, more, will act as model to the literary portrait-painter for Mme de Tonins of *Les Confessions du Comte de \*\*\**. The hero of that book finds the more than mature woman of wan and wasted appearance sitting sibyl-like in the circle of the *beaux esprits*, who take their own wit from her lips and toss it to and fro in a network of points and word-play, finally getting themselves so entangled therein that there is no issue for sound sense. Whoever of authors and artists has not offered incense to the goddess is here branded as a *sot*: "Nul n'aura de l'esprit hors nous et nos amis." At the same time, however, the goddess does not by any means seclude herself from physical adoration, and at the price of secrecy the Comte enjoys her final favours—only, it is true, soon to turn his back in disgust upon the beauty's decaying charms and her whole affected *ménage*.

Now, from this caricature must be erased all the capricious lines that are to be put to the account of the domineering *bel esprit* Duclos. For other *esprits*, of no less lofty flight, found in this circle entire satisfaction—Houdar de la Motte, for instance, whom physical blindness had not hindered at Mme de Lambert's from gazing with a seer's vision into world and human soul; or Président Hénault, before he deserted the *beaux esprits* and the pleasures of the table for the pietism of Queen Marie, and tittle-tattle and the breviary became his spiritual nourishment. Above all, however, there was Montesquieu, who, irradiated by the youthful fame of his *Lettres persanes*, was here initiated into the great world, and who afterward put the fate of his *Esprit des lois* trustfully into his patroness's hands, just as he, on his side, was always introducing illustrious foreigners, such as Lord Chesterfield, to this fount of French good manners, to send them back then to their own country *Français par régénération*. Voltaire's tyrannical wit, however, could



not have the field all to itself in this welter of the freest discussion, and only Mme du Châtelet's affection for the hostess brings him here at moments. Pretty women, however, who threatened to attract a crowd of admirers round them Mme de Tencin did not long tolerate near her. The piquant Mme de Mimeure may often have turned up her much-sung little snub nose to the ceiling here in vexation, and Mme du Deffand and La Geoffrin, on their own confession, went to school in this house only for professional reasons—La Geoffrin, indeed, to transplant the trunk of the *salon Tencin*, after its mistress's death, into her own house.

Thus this circle narrows itself more and more to a *bureau d'esprit*, soon even to an antechamber to the Académie; La Tencin enters by her *romans* (*Comte de Comminges*<sup>1</sup> and *Le Siège de Calais*<sup>2</sup>) into practical rivalry with Mme Lafayette, and before the reverend sister of a cardinal and passionate opponent of the Jansenists even the Breton heresy of a Duclos must bow. More and more sibylline becomes the old lady with the delicate doll's face, more maternal even at times. The young Marmontel sat often at her feet, a docile pupil, in her later home in the Rue Vivienne and at Passy, and his memoirs preserve for us a couple of rules of life, of pure gold, that she gave the writer and man on the threshold of his career:

Malheur à qui attend tout de sa plume! L'homme qui fait des souliers est sûr de son salaire: l'homme qui fait un livre n'est jamais sûr de rien.

Faites plutôt des amies que des amis; car au moyen des femmes, on fait tout ce qu'on veut des hommes. Mais de celle que vous croyez pouvoir vous être utile, gardez-vous bien d'être autre chose que l'ami.

Marmontel has also committed to paper in his memoirs a scene—the occasion being the reading of his *Aristomène* in La Tencin's villa at Passy in 1714—that threatens to overflow with scarcely tamed life. The reading is over, and the illustrious audience, Montesquieu, Fontenelle, Helvétius, and the Charles' Wain of the Wise, have sat down to supper with their hostess. At once begins a graceful and yet deadly serious game of shuttlewit. Marivaux is already all agog to catch a *mot* wherever it shoots up and launch it with a delicately sharpened point in vigorous flight against his adversary of the moment. He, Mairan, has seen it coming, and to catch the sally, reshape it, and fling it full at

<sup>1</sup> 1735.

<sup>2</sup> 1739.



*Le réveil*  
*à la toilette et de midi par le Charles d'Orléans, par le duc de Longueville*  
*à la toilette et de midi par le duc de Longueville*

MORNING RECEPTION AT THE TOILET TABLE  
 Engraving after Charles Eisen



Astruc is the work of a second. Nevertheless, he comes too late, for his opponent has at the same instant dispatched at him a *bon mot* of his own minting. The two missiles cross in mid-flight, and the momentary disconcertment of the duellists is dissolved in liberating laughter. Montesquieu meanwhile has been warding off attacks from right and left, with the measured grace of the marksman certain of his aim. Only Fontenelle goes on eating unconcernedly. Nobody notices with what attentive ears he is following the game, until suddenly a word, a flash of lightning, falls among the fireworks and makes them pale their ineffectual fires. Helvétius, however, is tucked away in a corner, storing up the experience in his memory to scribble from it later his book *De l'Esprit*. And over the whole scene floats, combining and balancing, the serene gaiety of the good matron, who in this way is permitted to see again every evening a miniature of the animated world wherein she spent her youth.

Like a sort of late blossoming, also, are the relations of the ageing Tencin with gay young sparks of the type of Peter Pan Piron, the poet who refused to grow old. He had readily allowed himself to be included among the lady's domestic pets (*bêtes*), filled the often much too academically serious evenings with undignified laughter, and repaid his patroness's New Year present to her friends—two yards of velvet for breeches—with another gift of apparel and the *gamin* verses :

Vous nous couvrez le cul l'hiver ;  
L'été nous vous couvrons la tête.

*Lines accompanying the gift of a summer hat*

So to the woman who, with the power of Church and King, guided the destinies of her friends and, for long, of France there remains true to the last only mastered wit. And something like forlorn regret for the buried pleasures of youth echoes even in the naïvely graceful words with which La Tencin breathed into her confessor's ear her farewell to the world : " Mon père, j'ai été jeune, j'ai été jolie, on me l'a dit, je l'ai cru, jugez du reste."



## THE HOUSE OF BRANCAS

Des esprits notés.

THE COUNTESS OF SANDWICH



**L**N the *bourgeois-noble bureau d'esprit* of La Tencin Duclos had become familiar with all that the eighteenth century's *salon* life had to give in the way of serious intellect, ambition, and graceful wisdom. To the frivolous amateurism, however, of *esprit* and life, to that hasty and, as it were, haphazard search for success of head and heart, as it was gradually to spread from the houses of the high aristocracy even into the serious circles, the student of mankind first gave himself up, with the delight of a discoverer, when the Brancas family opened its circle to him.

Louis de Brancas, Comte Forcalquier, Marquis de Céreste<sup>1</sup> was then the head of the senior line of a family of Neapolitan origin which had established itself in France during the reign of Charles VII, and in the junior branch, that of the Brancas-Villars, had risen about the middle of the seventeenth century to the rank of dukes and *pairs de France*. The Comte de Brancas, the "Scatter-brain," La Bruyère's Ménélaque, belongs to this junior line; his nephew, the third Duc de Brancas, set the pace with witty cynicism in the Regent's bacchanalia; and the later eighteenth century echoed with the amorous follies of the Comte Lauraguais-Brancas and the actress Sophie Arnould—with the lovers' wild abandonment from genuine passion to the vulgarity of thrashings and bites, with the Comte's burlesque duel with Prince Hénin on the grounds that he had almost killed Sophie with love's *ennui*, or with her touching gesture in the theatre when she begged the Minister Choiseul for her lover's freedom, he having been arrested as a pioneer of vaccination.

Against such an extravagance of originality and reputation the

<sup>1</sup> 1672-1750.



SOPHIE ARNOULD

J.-B. Greuze

*Les deux* - Photo Hautstane



senior line of the family could match, with moderate wealth, only ardent and successful ambition. Thus the famous Louis de Brancas had risen by the favour of La Maintenon and masterly utilization of every Court cabal to be Governor of Provence and Steward of Brittany; and as he lay dying, a grandee of Spain and Marshal of France, his last regret was that he could not bequeath his son the title of duke. Saint-Simon describes him (about 1748) as an imposing man with a splendidly proportioned figure, at the same time full of charm of manner and of tireless courtesy. His graceful culture and lively sympathy with past and present made conversation with him a pleasure. Solid piety, however, after Fénelon's own heart had never hindered him from the uncompromising pursuit of his earthly aims. In this his wife, with her extensive feminine connexions at the Court, potently assisted him, though without thereby imposing the least constraint upon herself as to her own love affairs. Beside this type of the ambitious courtier one of his brothers, Comte Céreste-Brancas, introduced into the family circle the self-conscious tranquillity of almost *bourgeois* limitation. In his *Mémoires secrets* Duclos has paid deep homage to this rare blend of *esprit* and humanity, as elsewhere he has shed a strong light on the, at times, sublime generosity of this only moderately well-to-do man.

So far the elder generation. Leader of the younger, however, in spacious attitude toward life as in vivacious, often affected wit, was the Marshal's son, Louis de Brancas, Comte Forcalquier. Of delicate health, but at the same time of reckless personal spirit, which in 1793 at the siege of Kehl got him his hair blown off for good by a German cannon-ball, he had exchanged, much against his will, the harsh pleasure of the open battlefield for the petty vanity of Paris *salon* life. Here too, however, a strongly mobile, somewhat irregular face, with big, always laughing eyes, distinguished carelessness of bearing, and the self-confidence of an *esprit* proved in a thousand verbal fights, assured him of enduring successes, which are chronicled with a natural touch of jealousy by famous contemporaries. La du Deffand, for instance, takes this character under the probe of her ruthless social criticism; exposes as its mainspring a glowing fancy that often makes his conversation fritter itself away into strained wit; complains of his tendency to sacrifice even the self-esteem of others to the conceit of the moment, which has won him a reputation for *méchanceté*; and lays her



finger finally on the want of independence in this social talent, which borrows its brilliance from the fashionable star of the day. This bit of snobbishness was helped also, no doubt, by the Comte's leaning toward the antithetical style of the *salon*-ruler Duclos. Voltaire, again, makes the *grand seigneur* one of his canny bows :

Des boulets allemands la pesante tempête  
A, dit-on, coupé vos cheveux :  
Les gens d'esprit sont fort heureux  
Qu'elle ait respecté votre tête.

But Bernis and the Président Hénault wax enthusiastic only about the fire and easy grace of his *esprit*, the beautiful Mme de Flarens says that a room becomes light for the first time when he enters it, and La Pompadour, without personal acquaintance with him, but on the strength of his reputation as a wit, engaged him in a delightful battle of correspondence. And though, indeed, at de Brancas's early death in 1753 the domineering d'Alembert heaves a sigh of relief that Parisian Society is at last free of its tyrant, we must put this confession under the heading of strongest tributes.

As her husband by his *esprit*, so did the Comtesse de Forcalquier rule this circle by her charm and temperament. As wife of the Marquis d'Antin she had fallen in 1739 under the King's roving eye, had shortly afterward assumed widow's weeds, and finally in 1742 brought her reputation and a gigantic fortune to the Hôtel Brancas. To her beauty even the Duc de Luynes, the dry-as-dust chronicler of Queen Marie's "ecclesiastical" Court, could not deny a very worldly rapture. On a small, marvellously proportioned figure she carried a round little face of flawless purity, out of which shone forth two big eyes, and the vivacious play of her features seemed to quiver responsively through her whole frame. Grimm seizes upon the lyrical exaggeration of an unknown admirer who declares all art incapable of creating an equal masterpiece :

Beau chef-d'œuvre de la nature,  
Que les Grâces avec l'Amour  
N'oseraient peindre en miniature. . . .

And Mme du Deffand calls her rival in mordant *bonhomie* "Bellissima," though only, indeed, to make to it immediately the nasty rhyme "Bêtissima." The latter epithet is a black calumny, if we may believe the little story about the box on the ear which the Marquise maliciously regales us with elsewhere. In a lively *tête-à-tête* with her impulsive husband the Comtesse has received a some-



THE MARÉCHAL BRANCAS  
Carle van Loo

*Remies Mission - Photo Le Couturier - Remies*



## THE HOUSE OF BRANCAS

what violent mark of affection which she carries still burning hot before the magistrates. Naturally, in the absence of witnesses her passionate complaints are silenced by shoulder-shrugging from the Bench. Doubly humiliated, the furious woman hastens home, rushes like a whirlwind into the Comte's study, gives him a ringing smack across the cheek, and cries, "Tenez, monsieur, voilà votre soufflet. Je n'en puis rien faire." More uglily impressive, however, must have been the scene in which Mme de Forcalquier settled up all her old scores with the Marquise, and, with the scornful taunt of intellectual senility, thrust the blind old woman still farther back into her loneliness. In the lustre of her young married happiness, however, and surrounded by the admiration of the whole Brancas circle, the Comtesse's temperament was able to express itself with boundless charm. For instance, in that delicious scene on the terrace at the Château Meudon, the family's summer residence, where the pretty woman, like a spoilt child, ran toward the visitors, snatched off their three-cornered hats and with peals of laughter sent them spinning one after another from the terrace steps far into the park. Like big, brightly coloured birds, they rose and fell, twisted and turned, and finally sank to earth in distant trees and bushes; while the guests, who in smiling correctness stood stiffly by, divided between amusement and anger, did not even know if they were permitted to run after the flyaways. This disarming charm must long have remained the Comtesse's, for even in 1766 Horace Walpole dreams of the fascination of this woman, in whose mouth his mother-tongue became more musical than the purest Tuscan:

Soft sounds that steal from fair Forcalquier's lips  
Like bee that murmuring the jasmin sips!  
Are these my native accents? None so sweet,  
So gracious, yet my ravished ears did meet,  
O power of beauty!

After the early death of her second husband in 1753 the Comtesse retired for completer widowed freedom to her house in the Rue de Grenelle-Saint-Germain, to divide what was left of her youth between wit and swift and irregular love. The police reports of the period keep an eye on the Swedish Ambassador, Baron Scheffer, who was so well able to multiply the enjoyment of this wilting body that after nights of love it was broad daylight when he emerged from the Comtesse's house to the open street. Other accounts wax satirical about the annexe to the seraglio of the old

Louis XV, and about the cruel way in which the fifty-year-old Mme de Forcalquier was removed through the boorishness of the Comte d'Artois from his wife's visiting-list. After this she buried herself for ever on remote estates.

For eleven years all intellectual movement in the Hôtel de Brancas revolved round this unequally matched pair. The focus of all the warm rays of sentiment, however, was a delightfully simple creature, in sheer womanliness almost without peer in this century of affectation: namely, Thérèse de Brancas, Comtesse de Rochefort. Her husband had died in 1739, after three years of married life, and left the scarce fully blossomed woman hardly anything beyond the name of an old Breton family that had stood up stalwartly for the welfare of its native place in the Parliamentary disturbances of Law's time. So the young widow returned to her maiden position at the head of the paternal household, and now stood in the middle of its motley social life, the threads of which imperceptibly but surely converged into her hands. Neither comprehensive culture nor notable bodily charm was hers in this. The princely casualness of her education had not even brought about her acquaintance with a second language, and of her beauty even her friends spoke with prudent reserve. She had one of those quiet faces which you must look at a long time to feel their peculiar spell; only if she became excited when talking, beauty, like a flash of lightning, lit up her mouth and eyes. Everything in her bearing and behaviour, however, breathed determined character, from the way she went about and the calm definiteness of her orders to the servants to her tireless mastery of social technique and the warm sincerity of her welcome to tried friends. Of her wit, however, she gave but rarely and as if with hesitation; for instance, when it was a question of summing up poetasters of Poinset's kidney in a word, "Cet auteur n'a vu le monde qu'à la porte!" Or when Duclos wanted to bring his coffee-house stories into her drawing-room, arguing that decent women had no need to blush at even the spiciest anecdote like the ladies of the Court; whereupon at the embarrassing point the Comtesse laughingly interrupted him with a tap of her fan: "Prenez donc garde, Duclos; vous nous croyez aussi par trop honnêtes femmes!" Out of the rapture of a budding *affaire de cœur*, however, and yet to a nicety, the Duc de Nivernois sketched this strangely subtle feminine character in delicate verses:



THE COMTESSE DE FORCALQUIER

J.-M. Nattier

Musée Jacquemart André, Paris Photo Bulloz



## THE HOUSE OF BRANCAS

Sensible avec délicatesse  
Et discrète sans fausseté  
Elle sait joindre la finesse  
A l'aimable naïveté.  
Sans caprice, humeur ni folie  
Elle est jeune, vive et jolie.  
Elle respecte la raison,  
Elle déteste l'imposture;  
Trois syllabes forment son nom <sup>1</sup>  
Et les trois Grâces sa figure.

With the death of Comte Forcalquier in 1753 the stillness of lonely old age creeps into the Hôtel Brancas, and Mme de Rochefort, at the height of her beauty and social triumph, receives the friends of the family in her own cosy home that the King has granted her in the Luxembourg. Here she divides her time between the circle of her intimates and the cultivation of a limited, but on that account the more lovingly tended, garden. Here, also, the Comtesse's beautiful affection for the Duc de Nivernois, which even the gossip of the most *médisant* of centuries did not dare to degrade, throve to full maturity.

Louis Mancini-Mazarini, Duc de Nivernois,<sup>2</sup> was the son of that Duc de Nevers who after a colourful grand seigneurial life had secretly laid title and fortune at the feet of the pretty actress Quinault. The boy Nivernois showed signs of wanting to be a second edition of his father, for under the year 1735 Barbier is able to report with outrageous laughter that the sixteen-year-old chip of the old block has played, as eavesdropper, the rôle of Amor at a sacrifice to Venus in the Château de Madrid by Mlle de Charolais with the Comte de Coigny; but that, too big to be a love-god, he was hauled out from behind his curtain and had his ears well pulled, whereupon to the delight of the Court he told tales about the over-mature lady in a cheeky *chansonnette*. His years of manhood, however, belie these *tours de page*. True, his marriage with Hélène de Pontchartrain was only a *mariage dos-à-dos*, and the stern daughter of the voice of God was a lady this true son of his century never knew. Birth, however, and inclination led him early from the career of arms to the statesman's, and in this capacity he served his country strenuously and unthanked. In 1749 the downfall of his brother-in-law, Maurepas, brought him back from Rome, where he had been ambassador, and the political jealousy and greed for amusement of La Pompadour, who

<sup>1</sup> Thérèse.

<sup>2</sup> 1716-98.



could not do without this paragon of *hommes du monde* at her parties, kept him for many a year a stranger to any kind of manly employment. In vain did Bernis strive to win his remarkably level brain, over the head of the Marquise's opposition, for the Conseil d'État, and when, in 1756, the Duc got the Berlin embassy Frederick II's attitude in the Seven Years War had already been decided. So the perfect man of the world brought back home only the purely human admiration of his great opponent.

To his royal master the dainty, delicate-limbed *homme à la mode* with the flute-soft voice was to the end of his days only "Nivernois le Mielleux"; Mme Geoffrin gibes, "Il est manqué de partout: Guerrier manqué, ambassadeur manqué, homme d'affaires manqué, homme de naissance manqué"—perhaps in the oppressive consciousness of being herself a *grande dame manquée*. And when he represented France in the London peace conference of 1762 this "Anacréon couronné de roses et chantant les plaisirs" watched only too seldom the nimble fingers of his secretary, the adventurous man-woman d'Éon. All the same, the Duc did some very statesmanlike work here, and Society almost smothered the "best son of his country"<sup>1</sup> with distinctions and academic honours. This, however, did not prevent the delicate man from getting the spleen and violent catarrh in the London fog, and crying unremittingly and with increasing vehemence to be recalled. In France, however, nobody, from the King down to the people, showed any proper gratitude for his self-sacrificing exertions; and so the Duc, now seriously ill, took refuge in the beloved consolations of evil hours gone by, in music and poetry.

Already at the age of twenty-seven he had been elected to the Académie, like Duclos, without having published anything. His friends, however, knew his flexible talent for verse; Bernis addressed two graceful epistles to this guardian of "good taste" and ennobled "courtly ambition," and the Duc's music to the Président Hénault's *Temple des Chimères* will win Voltaire in 1760 to playful applause. His *discours de réception*, subtly shaded and delivered with *précieux* charm in the Académie, of which he became Directeur before the usual time, drew thither a select, particularly feminine audience, which more than once, at some witty remark, some scarcely perceptible allusion, displayed a far from subtly shaded enthusiasm. Then the Duc, an eighteenth-century Castiglione,

<sup>1</sup> Horace Walpole.

enshrined his precocious and rich experience as man and courtier in one or two lucid, scrupulously weighed treatises (*e.g.*, *Sur l'État de courtesan*), dedicated for the greater part to his son-in-law, the Comte de Gisors, who in 1758, young and mourned by the nation, received his death-wound at the battle of Krefeld. A number of felicitously turned fables, which from time to time he loved to offer in diffident tones to fastidious friends in the Académie, found appreciation not only as the productions of a *grand seigneur*. He was, moreover, a finished performer on the fiddle, wielded a nicely firm pencil, and had, lastly, a notable talent for the stage, which displayed itself, for example, in the production of Gresset's *Le Méchant* in La Pompadour's private theatre and drew even professional players of the first rank under its spell.

Now, all these expressions of a versatile talent may be rated as mere attractive dilettantism. The Duc achieved model mastery, however, in *savoir-vivre*, in his inimitable blending of the somewhat stiff dignity of the "grand century" with the philosophical mobility of Louis XV's Court, in the way in which, for all his aristocratic assurance of speech and demeanour, he tirelessly contrived to spare even the most sensitive self-esteem, and in his knack of making himself well liked despite his obvious superiority. Lord Chesterfield, the prophet of 'good breeding,' in his *Letters to his Son* referred the youth, who had just gone to the high school of the man of the world at Paris, to this master of beautiful sociability, and the eighteenth century's *arbiter elegantiarum*, the Prince de Ligne, numbers the Duc among his intimate friends. This rounded *amabilité* bore fruit in the Duc's magnanimity and unenvious advancement of all genuine talent, but it reached its fullest expression in the many-sided hospitality of the Hôtel Nivernois, which in summer was transferred to the rural freedom of the Château Saint-Ouen. Far-famed was the *hôtel's cuisine*, which the Duc watched over with his own *raffiné* palate. Still more appreciated was the mental comfort in which the visitor immediately saw himself ensnared, especially onward from 1753, when the Duc's youthful love-knot with the Comtesse de Rochefort, interrupted through years of indifferent marriage, was at last tied again, this time for life. For the Duc's device as a loyal knight—a chicory flower with the motto, "J'ai blanchi sous mes liens"—proclaimed not the fame of his pietistic wife, although the man of twenty-five had yet laid at her feet his *Élégies à Délie*, but referred to his loving friendship for

the adored of his youth. More and more the Comtesse assumed the rights of wife—above all, that of guarding her beloved's fame. "M. de Nivernois lives in a small circle of dependent admirers, and Mme de Rochefort is high-priestess for a small salary of credit," Walpole tells Gray in 1766, while even the lovers' correspondence does not make it clear whether the woman gave the man everything. This gentle and steadily glowing affection, however, else unexampled in the century of little emotions, brought the last, conclusively important warmth to the ageing Duc's heart. For wife and daughter had let themselves be swept away by the Archbishop of Paris into the odious fight against the Jansensists, old friends such as Duclos died off, and renewed political activity under Malesherbes and Vergennes was to lead only to ephemeral successes. Then, in 1782, after the death of the Duchesse, the old man gave his hand even before the world to his dear friend, already sick unto death; and when, a few weeks later, she passed away her image long hovered near him as if in consolation—until in the forward-surg-ing waves of the Revolution all fine humanity was overwhelmed, and the little, delicate man must needs glean all his vital energy to oppose to the snarls of unbridled animal fury an almost antique grandeur of soul. Already into the rumblings of 1788 before the storm he had introduced like an idyll the smiling loveliness of a garden *fête* at Saint-Ouen in honour of Prince Henry of Prussia. Amid the blood-reek of the Terror, however, when the old man lay, half-naked and destitute, in the prison of the Carmelites among a howling pack of curs, in the manner of old Boethius he refreshed himself with the gay characters of Ricciardetto di Forteguerra, whom he translated into his most *soigné* French. And when, in 1794, the prison released him, the forgotten, to scarce believable freedom, the eighty-year-old man felt himself, like Goethe, borne up on new, warm waves of life:

Jeune, Nivernois fut courtisan sans bassesse,  
Soixante ans on vanta sa douce urbanité,  
Il perdit tout dans la vieillesse,  
Et garda sa sérénité.

It was with the regret that he had not made the most of life that he died in 1798.

Now, round these principal actors there ranged themselves, constantly, multifariously changing, marionnette-wise waiting for every sign or wrapped in capricious originality, countless subsidiary

figures. There is, to take an example, Mme de Flamarens, whose mysterious charm reminded her contemporaries of the cloudy loveliness of Vergil's Venus, and whom Voltaire celebrated as queen of fashion. The heart-breaker Richelieu was laid low, raging and unsuccessful, by her magic spell, and her death is recorded with beautiful emotion by her friend Mme du Deffand—the same du Deffand who after years of intimacy with the Brancas household taunted the Comtesse de Forcalquier with stupidity, because *bétissima* was such a good rhyme to *bellissima*, and whose jealous hatred Mme de Rochefort in the end expelled from this *salon*.

The Duchesse de Mirepoix, again, had pretensions to a little court of her own, even in virtue of her singular history. To her first husband, Prince Lixin, she had meant all the happiness that earth could give, before in 1734 he fell by Richelieu's sword in a duel. With her second husband, however, the Maréchal et Duc de Mirepoix, this woman then tied for life one of those few knots of true affection that stand out with double strangeness against this century's background of general married indifference. She had, moreover, a conquering charm of appearance that even the stern Montesquieu saluted in elegant verses, a most cultivated grace of mind, and the cloudless gaiety of a child. Never did her *bonté* and benevolence fail, especially after she had entered as *dame de palais* into the confidence of Queen Marie, and as his partner at the card-table into the Petits Appartements of the King. To this passion for play, however, she sacrificed in the end all her dignity. "Mme de Mirepoix is *the* agreeable woman of the world when she pleases—but there must not be a card in the room," deplores Walpole in a letter of 1774. Steadily increasing gambling debts eventually made the *grande dame* the shadow of La Pompadour, to whom, after Damiens's attempt on Louis XV's life, by wise exhortation she restored her calm, and with it her ascendancy over her wavering lover; and, together with La du Barry, the Duchesse, by the King's wish, introduced polite, naked vice into Versailles. Her brother, the stern Prince de Beauvau, turned his back on the blinded woman, Mme du Deffand pointed with her finger after the *esclave d'une infâme*, and with meaning smiles the courtiers passed round a little verse that had sprung up no one knew from where:

Mirepoix, plus avisée,  
Laisant aux sots la fumée,  
Et du solide occupée,  
Se fait donner de l'argent.

## WOMAN AND ROCOCO IN FRANCE

Depuis longtemps la commode  
De la maîtresse à la mode  
Elle vend de sa pagode  
Les bontés bien chèrement.

From there, however, it is but a step further to the licence of the scene in which the Duchesse plays Potiphar's wife to the young Prince de Ligne.

Now there was nothing of all this ugliness in the palmy days of the Hôtel Brancas. There Mme de Mirepoix and the Comtesse de Rochefort let themselves be borne aloft agreeably by their youthful fame and Montesquieu's admiration. Bernis exercised his flexible talent for the *chanson* on the *coterie's* feminine charms and festal pleasures, before political ambition estranged him from the life of enjoyment and his plan to summon the Duc de Nivernois to the Council of State was wrecked on La Pompadour's opposition. A special place in the Hôtel Brancas, however, was filled by the *ami des hommes*, the Marquis de Mirabeau. He had fled hither for refuge from his wife's shrewishness, had found in Mme de Rochefort a sympathetic patroness, and gave expression in this circle to the cordiality his family's contrariness and the unruly genius of his son, the great Revolutionary, prevented his turning on his own flesh and blood. The Comtesse took a delight in the Southerner's *naïve* egoism and verve, liked to clear up her own moral notions by his advocacy of the opposite view (as in that letter of 1757 which, with a subtlety nourished by Duclos's, analyses *esprit* and character), or in liberating laughter at his very human remarks in Rabelaisian vein to stifle for a few moments all morality; and she surrounded the poor fellow with tender care when, in 1760, his *Théorie sur l'impôt* had landed him in the philosophers' prison of Vincennes.

As if by accident the Comte Pont de Veyle now and then thrust his faithful, dog-like physiognomy among this company, talked a little, laughed a little, acted a scene from his latest parody, and vanished as silently as he had come. The Marquis d'Ussé, again, remained loyal to the *rôle* of Mme de Rochefort's affectionate little page, let slander whisper never so mischievously behind their backs, and, in the old Christian conviction that he was born only for others, he devoted himself entirely to them, and expressed himself unreservedly in a surprising talent for acting that continually swept his audience away into fresh raptures. The Comtesse's constant

companion along the park ways at Meudon and through the enticing mazes of Italian literature was the Abbé de Sade, unsuspecting uncle of that monster who at the end of the century will take from this circle for his *Justine* the *motif* of Duclos's *Madame de Luz*, to smother it in blood and mire.

Gourmet, historian, and graceful writer of occasional verse all in one, and, moreover, fully sated of his respectable adultery with Mme du Deffand, Président Hénault had brought his rakishness into this company, was heartily glad when his tyrannical *amante* fell out with the Brancas family, and took advantage of his growing intimacy to make lively protests against Mme de Rochefort's beggarly *cuisine*, which, for the rest, he scarcely let escape him one evening. Sometimes, too, there made its appearance in the Luxembourg the plebeianly noble face of Diderot, before whose hammering eloquence the little creatures shrank into themselves with a tickling shudder. The Sèvres figure of Marie-Anne Quinault slipped gracefully from the side of the Duc de Nevers on to an improvised *estrade*, to scatter delicately pointed *mots* and ideas among the attentive company; or the silvery-clear soprano of the *diva* Marie Fel woke man and woman from the dream into which the contemplation of her enigmatic beauty threatened to transport them.

Marvelling, repelled, and ever again enticed, foreigners too had approached, gradually more and more, the living work of art that was this *salon*. Here Anna Pitt, Lord Chatham's sister, resolutely disavowed her great brother's hatred of everything French. In this house, also, Horace Walpole perfected his knowledge of the world and men. As a true German, Baron Gleichen, the Danish Ambassador, drank so deeply at this spring of French life as to renounce his own nature. Here Francesco Gatti seems to have converted Comte Lauraguais-Brancas to vaccination, and the Polish woman Jablonowska-Talmont brought into this circle the lustre and the absurdity of her beggar-thieves for Charles-Édouard Sans-terre, who as pretender to the English throne will later be the nine days' wonder of Europe.

Now into the *salon Brancas*, the tranquil-flamed focus of beautifully balanced aristocratic social life, where *nuances* of character and disposition imperceptibly merged into one another, Duclos introduced uncompromisingly, and yet with shrewd calculation, the fireworks of dazzling wit and the square-built shadow of the plebeian. In his correspondence with Mme de Rochefort the

Marquis de Mirabeau refers, half angrily, half amused, to a demeanour so foreign to the place. Grimm libelled his enemy's whole character in the description *voix de gourdin*, and the Abbé Baudeau seeks with ill-concealed envy to revenge himself on Duclos's *ton de fausset* for his own failure, despite all the assistance of his teacher Mirabeau, to get a footing in the Brancas circle. Not without obstacles, therefore, did the Breton rustic's calculated raciness establish itself on the *salon* parquet.

It was precisely his strongly emphasized Breton character, however, that already at home had won Duclos the regard of the Maréchal and Royal Governor Brancas, and the moralist's fondness for surveying all human and social activities with philosophic serenity must have commended itself to a noble house that, in the person of one of its members, the Comte de Brancas, had previously supplied La Bruyère with the original of his Ménélaque. Hence the obviousness with which Duclos the man also had been drawn into the centre of this compatriotic circle; hence the impassioned efforts of the lady of the house to secure *mondain* reputation for her *protégé*, as determinedly as if the honour of the family were at stake. Like Buffon and Nivernois, without having published anything, the man of thirty-five thus obtained admission into the Académie des Inscriptions; and when in 1746 Duclos had accompanied his patroness, Mme de Rochefort, to the Pyrenean watering-place of Cauterets, to look after the sorely sick Comte Forcalquier, the Brancas, with the support of La Pompadour, opened a regular siege in letters to unlock for their candidate the portals of the Académie Française; in which, after some opposition, they were quite successful. How closely, however, for all his uncouthness, Duclos the man also was assured of his patrons' sympathy is shown by the literary portrait that in 1742 the Comte Forcalquier, practising a graceful custom of pre-Revolutionary Society, drew of his friend of many years. "L'esprit étendu," it says, "l'imagination bouillante, le caractère doux et simple, les mœurs d'un philosophe, les manières d'un étourdi." Withal, the Comte continues, he has his temperament under rein, as the skilled rider his barb. Only let no man seek to disparage his intellectual merit, which he guards jealously and without respect for persons. Outward charm he knows not, and envy is for him the cancer of the soul. Above all he prizes freedom, and even the fetters of Society he makes bold to treat but as chains of roses. What he there lacks in courtesy







and grace, however, he makes up for a thousandfold in *esprit*. This little likeness, sketched by a friend's adroit and circumspect hand, Duclos repudiated as flattering. His self-portrait, however, which he painted over the Comte's drawing, only emphasizes with the *naïve* immodesty of the self-conscious man all the main lines of its predecessor, and so we may take it as being quite correct.

It is to his *esprit*, then, and his uncompromisingly preserved Breton character that Duclos owes his social and human success in the Hôtel Brancas. Not less, however, to his original and notable talent for the amateur stage.

The amateur theatre of the eighteenth century is the most graceful effort of a feeble Society to escape the death-grip of *ennui*. It had developed from the cold splendour of the Versailles Court usages, the mummeries of nymphs and gods in which the "great" Louis deigned to veil his extremely earthly love affairs, and into which even Molière's genius was too weak to infuse movement. Then the *bacchae* of the Regency had torn away their stiff drapery, and, naked in body and soul, danced madly through the chamber-plays of the Palais-Royal and the garden *fêtes* at Saint-Cloud. Transparent veils and paint were again drawn with indolent elegance by Mme de Pompadour, in the Théâtre des Petits Appartements, over her own and others' vice, to fan the tired senses of her King and master to a brief flicker. Meanwhile, however, the fashionable malady of *ennui* had filtered down from the Court into the circles of the nobility and *bourgeoisie*, and with it came the panacea of the amateur stage. And the panacea became the fashionable malady. It became an insidious fever or an attack of madness, by way of the backstairs it slipped into the *bourgeois* household, and at the whim of the lover it glided into the voluptuous twilight of the Petite Maison. No even moderately well-to-do family had not produced its own troupe of players. And round the plebeians Collé (author of *La Vérité dans le vin*) and Carmon-telle (who wrote the *Proverbes dramatiques*), the masters of the tiny, tipsy, ticklish *pièce de mœurs*, there was as much squabbling as round the most spoilt heartbreakers of the *salons*. Then what a designing, costume-making, and learning by heart with flushed cheeks and trembling hands, what *rusé* manœuvring for the most grateful rôle, what a foretaste of enjoyment at rehearsals by flickering link-light, with furtive pressure of a partner's hand and exploratory kisses on the neck, lest ravaged paint play the traitor!

And then when the great evening came, and at the end the two lovers stood, drunk with passion and triumph, before the applause-tossed *salle*, waves of acclamation surging round them, envy shining in the eyes of a hundred friends, what mattered then all the irksomeness of preparation, the fever of rehearsals, hours-long fitting, and days-long fasting? Man and woman had revelled a moment in honest acting, to the extent of their capacity for sentiment, and Society had offered them from the heart its most flattering tributes, admiration, envy, and jealousy.

Now, that the Hôtel Brancas should fall a victim to the stage craze, and from the very first and most violently, was inevitable from the family's intellectual attitude to life. The Maréchale and the Duc de Nivernois had brought a respectable talent to speedy growth in La Pompadour's theatre, and the name of Comte Lauraguais is, indeed, permanently associated with the complete expulsion of spectators from the stage. In their Paris *hôtel*, however, and above all in summer at the Château Meudon, the left wing of which the King had granted to the Maréchal, there was inaugurated round about the middle of the century a special nursery of grave and gay dramatic art. All the members of the family, all their friends, strove in rivalry there to make what life had refused in the way of self-oblivious charm and secret wishes come into being in the lovely make-believe world of the theatre. Mme de Rochefort used to let flow into the *ingénue* parts she chose by preference only the spring-limpidity of her nature. All the cajolery of the *grande coquette*, however, which hunger for life and passion for cards had repressed in her, were successfully brought into play here by the Duchesse de Mirepoix. The Comtesse Forcalquier lent to *soubrette* parts the pert conceit of the spoilt *dame du monde*, and Mme du Deffand absorbed in Président Hénault's pieces on this stage all the colourfulness and the rich capacity for variation of artistic life, before the night of blindness buried her in her 'coffin.'

The Marquis d'Ussé's aristocratically genial presence stood him in good stead as *père noble*, the Ducs de Nivernois and Duras shared with Comte Forcalquier the parts and pleasures of *amants*, and Duclos as cozening *valet* knew how to keep the sentimental and humorous relations of the performers adroitly in movement. Comte Forcalquier in particular had also put at this stage's service a by no means commonplace literary gift. His contemporaries laud the



L'AMOUR AU THEATRE FRANCOIS.

LOVE ON THE STAGE  
Engraving after Antoine Watteau

400 1/2



wit and stage-craft of half a dozen comedies that, though never printed, have come down to us in manuscript. In them a man of the world of fine sensibilities has caught his own experience and others' folly as they fly, clothed them in satirically pointed sentences and combined them into dramatically effective snapshots. Particularly in their style these pieces will have been a faithful echo of that *esprit noté* which, nourished by Duclos's antithetic manner, permeated the whole Brancas circle. *Les Blasés*, for example, introduces us to a plot familiar from Marivaux, of how two young misogynists of opposite sex are led into each other's arms. Quite in Duclos's *esprit* and expository style, Frontin gives a flash-light portrait of his love-sated master, Lindor :

Attaché comme un criminel au char du plaisir qui l'évite, le cœur gros de soupirs, il suit la routine d'un état que l'ivresse seule et la gaieté peuvent justifier.

And then when Lindor breathes forth his loathing of the love affair with the *blasée* Chloé, in the words,

Tout le piquant de cette aventure est émoussé. J'éprouve d'avance depuis six mois presque tous les dégoûts du mariage. Ma bonne fortune est publique au point qu'on la respecte, et que personne ne daigne plus la traverser,

the same Frontin gibes away his master's disgust with the diabolic jest,

Eh, monsieur, le mariage vous procurera peut-être tout le manque de respect que vous pouvez désirer ! Vous ignorez le pouvoir du sacrement.

The *Père Raisonnable*, again, leaves the responsibility of educating his two sons to life and women, the result of this method of instruction, however, being to bring to full bloom that cooing coxcombry with which, for instance, the Chevalier de Plaisance flatters his marquise :

Vous ne pouvez avoir, madame, qu'une affaire à votre toilette, mais elle est capitale : c'est de bien considérer pendant ce moment-là ce qui fait l'occupation et les délices de l'univers. Tout le reste de la journée vous ne pouvez voir votre visage dans votre miroir, et voilà le désavantage singulier que vous avez avec tous ceux qui vous rencontrent.

In the *Chevaliers de la Rose-Croix*, a farcical skit on Illuminism, we find the *elixir vitæ* used to cure two foolish girls of their prejudice against the inappropriate age of their *amants*. Of course, here

too it is the valet Raymond (acted by Duclos) who pulls all the strings and in the end leads the reluctant lovers into each other's arms. If all these works may be considered as preponderantly the graceful recreation of the *grand seigneur*, the one-act play *Le bel Esprit du temps* brings out uncompromisingly the scorn and malice of the moralist. And in the *bel esprit* Alcidor the Comte Forcalquier has drawn (before Beaumarchais's Almaviva) with easy and suggestive strokes the elegant *fainéant*, for whose pasha-like desires all the rest of the world was created :

Appelé uniquement à éclairer le monde et à faire les délices de la société, je ne me précipiterai point dans les classes subalternes des manœuvres de l'univers.

To him woman is an expensive pet animal, whose value for the fancier might be spoilt by childbed and the nursery. She can, however, be lent without scruple to others, to give them too a chance of appreciating her :

Au regard de sa conduite, pourvu qu'elle ne soit pas délabrée au point du méchant air pour elle et d'une contenance embarrassante pour moi dans le public, j'en serai plus que content.

And here the Comte sums up tersely and conclusively the eighteenth century's code of honour in regard to marriage: It is part of good taste to return borrowed things in good condition.

In the plays of the Comte Forcalquier a benevolent Fate has left us the most direct and, as it were, the *living* expression of that fashionable *esprit* that combined way-of-the-worldishness, self-ridicule, and yet deep human interest in national events, and took on a special *nuance* among the Brancas; that *esprit* that in Duclos's books has quenched every vital spark, and by its sheer intellectual dryness and nakedness outrages the artistic sense. And this *esprit* must, for all its peculiarity, have had a wide effect; for d'Alembert, to take an example, heaves a sigh of relief at the Comte Forcalquier's death, as if a rival had been removed, and it was not only on personal grounds that Mme du Deffand's circle was so sharply critical of the Hôtel Brancas.

Ils sont toujours occupés à être fins, et les choses les plus rondes, ils les rendent pointues par les paroles, ce qui est de très mauvais goût. C'est le tour d'esprit du temps, et surtout de leur petite académie, où l'on regarde le siècle passé comme n'étant qu'à l'enfance de l'esprit.

Certainly two weighty recommendations to posterity.



## NOBLESSE AND COURT



DESPITE its hothouse luxuriance of *esprit*, despite pride of birth and feminine domination, the Hôtel Brancas had meant to Duclos a little bit of his native Brittany, whither he could flee from the unrest of the day to unrestrained naturalness. La Pompadour's court, on the other hand, brought into tirelessly alert play the gifts of the ambitious *homme du monde* and shrewd observer of life. Here the philosopher picked his way onward with adroit directness among the lights and shadows of aristocratic life to the person of the lonely King, and on the dainty hand of La Pompadour the homely peasant rose there to the pinnacle of social triumph.

Si la noblesse est vertu, elle se perd par tout ce qui n'est pas vertueux :  
si elle n'est pas vertu, c'est peu de chose.

LA BRUYÈRE

Here we might take *vertu* (not quite according to the author's meaning) in that higher, original sense which at its heroic periods made the nobility regardlessly plant both feet on the neck of serfdom. It was cruel, inhuman, perhaps; but only at this price could the magnificent men of action maintain their feudal state—those men who stand like towering columns round the kingly thrones of the Middle Ages; and there uprose as the freest of the free those steely, supple captains of armies and shepherds of the people, to whom—Charlemagne, for example, and Barbarossa—their epoch owes life and fullness. To the noble of the eighteenth century in France, however, there remained of his power and pride only what was not often even a *beau geste*—a deterioration that had already appeared, for that matter, in the Court rabble of Louis le Grand. For the intoxication with power of Condé and Retz in the Fronde had ebbed away, after all its ups and downs, to a bloody farce, the *noblesse* had had to content itself with the mere function



of the *seigneur*, and the triumphant Crown could accordingly spare itself the pains of even just playing off *bourgeoisie* and *seigneurie* against each other, as its supremely wise policy of ruling had steadily been, even since the Renaissance, to the consolidating of the royal house. Deeper and deeper, henceforth, the petty squire sulked into his nothingness and beggarly poverty, brooded in his tumbledown *château* over his close-hugged family tree, ground his teeth when the royal *intendant* decided against him in a claim for damages done by wild game brought by some refractory farmer, and, to make up for the fine, wrung from his villagers road-tax and tithes that were by so much the more exacting. In vain did La Bruyère, and perhaps Duclos (if he be the author of *Essai sur la vieillesse*), at the abolition of seignorial duties by the central power long before the Revolution cry for remission of the *corvées*. So much, then, for the slowly darkening fate of the country squires. The great landowners and the barons, however, had given up the bracing freedom and tang of forest and field air for the cooped life of the Court. What mattered that in the world outside this cage bit after bit of the old estate crumbled away under the dirty hands of the moneylenders, and a rapacious rabble of agents by robbery and extortion made the people's rage gather about the head of their distant lord? He sat meanwhile with wife and children and his domestics in his coquettish little *hôtel* in the Place d'Armes at Versailles, heedlessly squandering his *rentes* and more, and scuffling now and again for the sunniest place in the eye of his King and master. He had had to give up his most outstanding seignorial right, that of sitting in the Council to determine war and peace; scarcely did now and then a tame *bon mot* fly after a Minister into exile. Enjoyment, therefore, at any price. So there he sat for many a long year, until imbecile habit turned his brain musty, excess of slothful inactivity made his limbs flaccid, and undistinguished vice smothered every noble aspiration. His daughter was chaffered away suitably to her rank, his sons grew up and flocked to the Court—but all the pensions have been allotted, and the King cannot make every young good-for-nothing a captain in the Army, while as for burdening his brains and soiling his slim fingers with serious work, God forbid! Why, Monsieur Papa has never yet been able to forgive the otherwise honoured Duc de la Rochefoucauld for having brought himself to mix with English money-grubbers; and it was only the other day he wrote with his very



CHASSE DE PHALARIS

F. de Troy

6 Pl. — Petit-Bateau



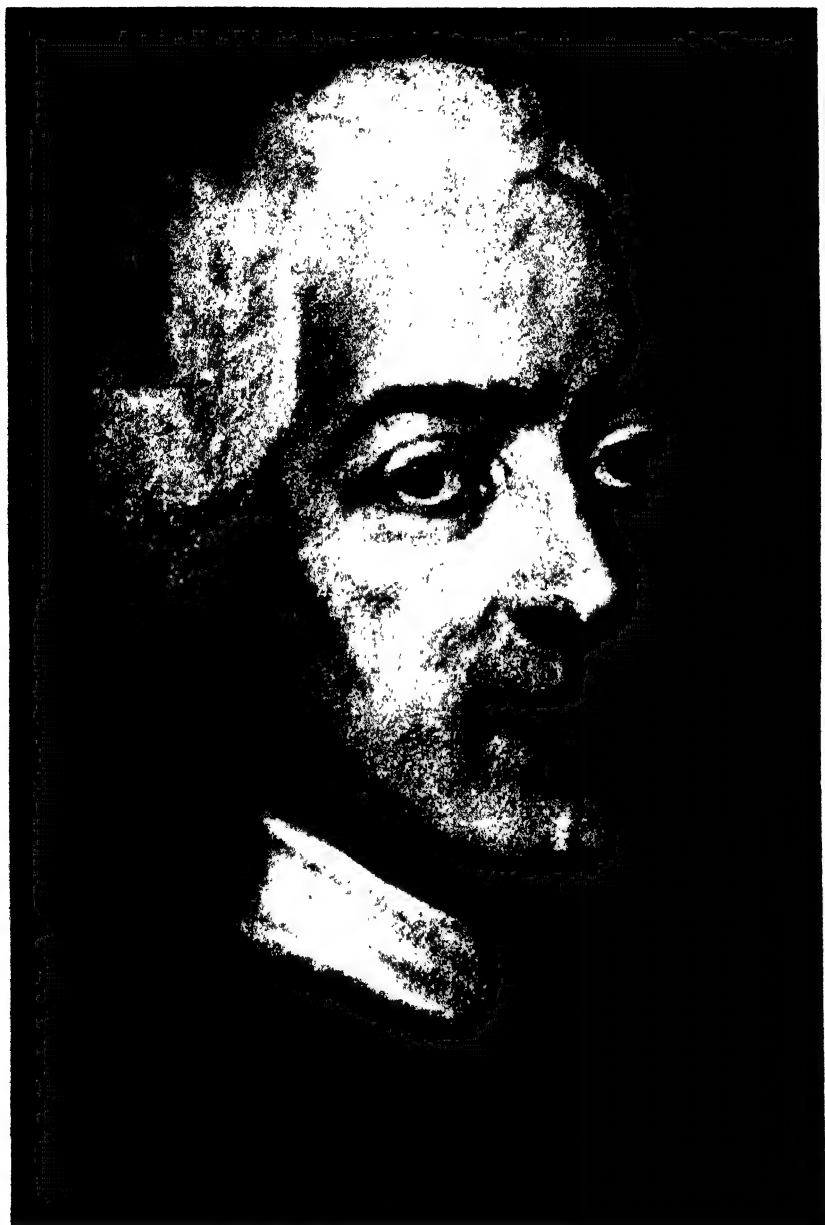
own hand a pamphlet consigning to perdition the crazy Abbé Coyer's *Noblesse commerçante*.<sup>1</sup> Remains only cassock and bands. And so the fresh-cheeked youngsters, with their little, corrupt, unsatisfied desires, idled about in thousands, behind the *prie-Dieu* of beauties in church, at gossiping dressing-tables for the morning call with a languishing madrigal, in the evening in a latticed *loge*, where lewd remarks could glide so delicately and smoothly into a partner's ear and bosom, at night, divested of all spirituality, in extremely mundane rites of love. Fortune? Career? These are made, in this way, simultaneously, as by the little Abbé Bernis, who had vaulted up by women's favour and on women's skirts to the dignity of cardinal. Pride of rank? "Ah! C'est une autre paire de manches." It alone makes life still colourful. And then a man owed it to his ancestors. True, indulgent smiles had greeted M. de Boufflers' anecdote the other day, about the aristocratic *abbesse* who, after a bewraying fall in church, whispered to her rescuer as he helped her up, "Monsieur, ces bourgeois l'ont-ils vu?" But it was found Biblically coarse of Mme de Sabran roughly to thrust back the leech summoned in hot haste to attend the Regent as he lay dying on La Phalaris's bosom, with the words, "Ne le saignez pas, il sort d'avec une gueuse!" And speaks not the voice of the blood royal in the charming childish astonishment of Mme Adélaïde that she, Louis XV's daughter, has not even one finger more on her princess's hand than her vulgar waiting-woman has on her clumsy peasant's paw? And as for the Comte d'Évreux! With what a liberating gesture he kicked to the feet of the dirty financier Crozat the two millions for which, as settlement of his debts, he had chaffered himself away to the fellow's, for the rest, appetizing daughter—two millions, which the Comte had just snatched from the clutches of the swindler Law! And should not one go on one's knees to the adorable little Duchesse de Chaulnes for remarking, with kiss-pursed lips, "Une duchesse a toujours trente ans pour un bourgeois"? Unattractive as the plebeian crank Diderot generally is, the muses are often kind to him: "Quoi qu'on fasse, on ne peut se déshonorer, quand on est riche." And has not M. de Destouches already made it as clear as daylight, in *La Force du naturel*, that anyone of baser origin is bound always, in spite of the most assiduous education, to smell of the stables? Above all, this *canaille*! As the *grands seigneurs*

<sup>1</sup> 1756.

do not like human flesh, they let their stags and hinds feed on the peasants' land; then the venison gets the desired gamy flavour: "C'est un fidéicommis."

Along some such lines as these the mind of a noble *fainéant* pictured, caricatured to the grotesque, the world outside himself and his fellows. And who was there to correct him? To his lack of education the *philosophes* at best were nothing but a joke, their ideas only a graceful puzzle. The hatred that now and then surged up from the depths and raged round his coach must needs seem to him the envy of the poor devil who thinks the world out of joint because *he* cannot afford a carriage. And did not people cringe and kotow to him until he had more than enough of it? The solid industry and wealth of the *bourgeois* men were directed only at enabling them to puff themselves out ultimately in the sham splendour of a noble style of living. The *bourgeoises*, however, cast sidelong glances at the high-heeled shoes and newest *frisure* of Mlle Ninette, the latest flame of Monsieur le Chevalier; and how sweetly her eyes glanced, how charmingly hoity-toity was the way she turned up her little nose, *ma chère*! Rich daughters of the middle classes, often beautiful and well educated in their own way, counted themselves lucky to get the chance of acting as manure to the barren soil of noble estates. A new-baked Comte d'Orsay believes his nobility attained because his tax-assessment has been reduced. Nay, Voltaire the *roturier* tries, to the disgust of Walpole and Mme de Choiseul, to pass off even Catharine the Great's murder of her husband as a joke. So Duclos is only too right when he lays bare this rottenness with the knife of his antithesis: "Les esclaves volontaires font plus de tyrans que les tyrans ne font d'esclaves forcés."

He who is not wont to fear humankind will commonly all the more mock the Divine—nay, even his own sentiment. Blasphemy itself, however, in the eighteenth century is of a delicate and restrained sort, and mediocrity disarms even indignation. The charmingly dashing Cardinal d'Auvergne could not remember his Paternoster and Credo. The sixty-year-old Bishop of Rennes had scarcely been at Court a day before the straitlaced Mme de la Rivière had to speak to him sharply about his way of going on; whereat he laughed till it seemed he would never stop. At Haute-fontaine the Archbishop of Narbonne's guests hear Mass in the *château* chapel and say their prayers, in an atmosphere of incense and choral music, to the gracefully entwined nudities of soft-bound



LOUIS XV

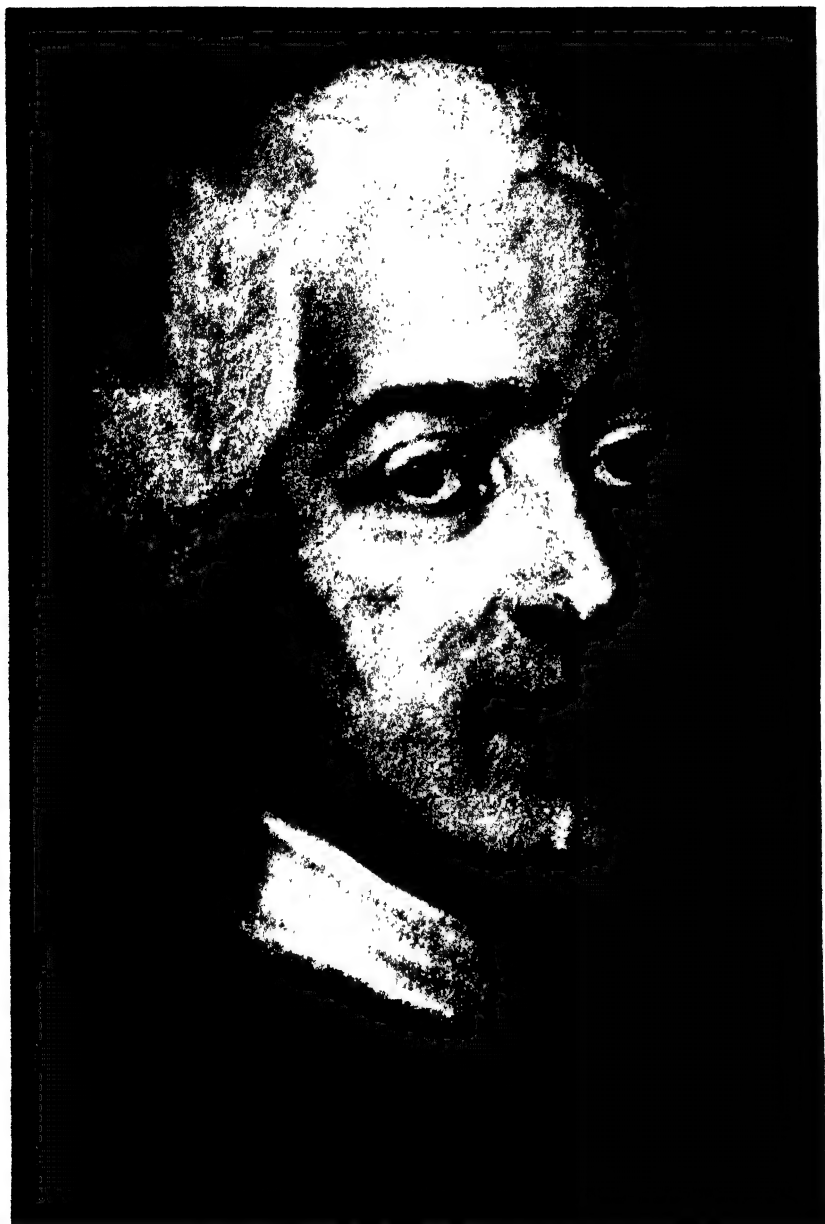
Pastel by M.-Q. de Latour

*Musée Saint-Quentin (now in the Louvre)*

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LOUIS XV

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*at Saint-Quentin (now in the Louvre)*





pornographic books. Because marriage is girt about with every law human and divine these scoffers look upon it with horror. And it was with ravished upturnings of the eyes that Society passed round that *billet* of a hoity-toity little madam to her husband, from which the eighteenth century's drolly sulky marriage-god seems to snigger:

Monsieur, je vous écris parce que je ne sais que faire, et je finis parce que je ne sais que dire.

SASSENAGE DE MAUGIRON, *bien fâchée de l'être*

One must, to be sure, allow oneself the luxury of children, but God knows they are a terrible nuisance! Their birth rubs the youthful bloom off their mother's body, and drives the disenchanted husband all the sooner into the arms of her unmarried rivals. With their romping and uncontrolled high spirits the little brats are always in the way; the task of educating them robs their mother of a precious hour at her dressing-table every morning and even compels her, among other things, seriously to glance at some serious book. Because he has to be thinking of his children's future, the husband dare not ask a dozen of his former friends to dinner, and the English thoroughbred for which he recently began to build extra accommodation in the stables had much better remain unbought. If it was not for keeping up the succession, really! . . . And here again Duclos sinks his scalpel into the morbid flesh: "Les grands aiment leur postérité, et ne se soucient point de leurs enfants."

The most perfect expression of his—even in wickedness—mediocre century, plaything of aristocratically reckless instincts and the pettiest self-seeking, and yet almost great in the consistent logic of his viciousness, is Maréchal Richelieu, grand-nephew and antitype of the adamantine cardinal. Mme Geoffrin, as is known, contemptuously turned him out, as an *épluchure des grands vices*, from her circle. All the same, however, the man who to the end of his days could not set down a single sentence without a mistake found his way into the Académie Française twenty-three years before his contemporary, Voltaire. The gaps in his education he sought to fill up in the Bastille, where semi-royal love affairs, and, no doubt, something in the way of a little *coup d'état* against the Regent, more than once lodged him. He plays matrimonial Providence to the vicious child Louis XV; hand in hand with his enemy

La Pompadour, he spins and thwarts every Court cabal; and he might have become a proper diplomat had he not, while ambassador in Vienna, sold his soul in deadliest earnest conjuration to the devil. To the angry astonishment of La Pompadour he displays youthful energy at the beginning of the Seven Years War in driving Admiral Byng from Minorca; then with senile sloth he sets off with the French Army for Hanover, revels and tipples away his time, and finally returns with great composure to Paris, there to spend his loot in building the Pavillon de Hanovre as a casket of unbridled lust and to flaunt it in the people's faces. Both his wives the *grand seigneur* makes over, like riding-horses, to familiar friends, for them to use whenever they wish; it was only out of his *amours* that he tried to make the great affairs of his life, and in the romantic fireplace intrigue with Mme de la Popelinière, and his subtle torture of poor Mme Michelin, he pretty nearly brought it off. But even here he must have squandered himself, for in his *escritoire* his executors found bundles of *billets doux*, nicely tied up with ribbons, that this indiscriminate lecher had not had time and inclination even to open.

Now over against this pretty farrago of polished commonplace vice stands a modest handful of half-virtues. The French *aristo* of the eighteenth century has only the qualities of his hereditary defect, weakness of character. And if, as Nietzsche says, the restrained strength with which the rider reins in his passionately proud steed to the Spanish step is a symbol for every strong character, even there the eighteenth century declined to mediocrity. It is true that foreigners who felt the need for culture of a Dutens took a delight in letting themselves be borne comfortably along the stream of the French nobility's perfectly proportioned life, and a Vauvenargues drew from his consciousness of blue blood amazing strength to bear unutterable torment of body and soul; but the operatic gaiety with which the French officers at Fontenoy raised their hats to the English, "Messieurs les Anglais, tirez les premiers!" was only *courage de cœur* in warfare they were accustomed to, and the more valuable *courage d'esprit* that sums up in a trice the difficulties of a situation and their remedy left these big children pitifully in the lurch before the tangible and hideous danger of the Revolution. That the eighteenth-century *aristo* made boundless luxury, that lordliest denial of all earthly stress, his heart's concern; that each barleycorn of possible enjoyment was too precious, the



THE MARÉCHAL RICHELIEU  
Engraving after Gault Saint-Germain



reflection of fulfilled pleasure in the countenances of friends—nay, even of parasites and domestics—was too solacing for him to count the coppers, will remain unforgettable even in lean times. But even when we think of the royal state Choiseul kept up at his creditors' expense there creeps over us a misgiving of morbid frivolity; and bankruptcies like that of the princely house of Guéménée puts us overmuch in mind of Musset's weakling Rolla, who spends his last gold piece on poison that he may expire on a girl's bosom after his last delirious night of love. Simple and distinguished *bonté*, lastly, and generosity, which in Duclos's opinion constitute the only fruitful expression of true *noblesse*, are by no means lacking in this century of sterile surface culture. Under the year 1761 Barbier tells us with impressive dryness of the nine-year-old Duc de Bourgogne, who, injured at play by a too wild comrade, passed away under the leech's hands without one sound of pain and without giving the culprit away. The Prince de Beauvau lost most of his fortune in the Revolution, but the hospitals and schools of his Lorraine estates were never a farthing the poorer for it. But, again, and preponderantly, when the *noblesse*, driven by the holy wrath of Rousseau and the Economists, descends from its Cloud-cuckoo-land among the country folk, philanthropy becomes for it a form of *bergerie*. Instead of lolling in the snug chimney-nooks of the Paris *hôtels*, benevolence walks in silk hose and velvet coat, in panniers and high-heeled shoes, among the droll little huts of a theatre village. Mme Adélaïde plays the fiddle to the peasants at a country *fête*, and some nimble pencil, such as Debucourt's, turns the enchanting scene into a *genre* picture that all Paris will crowd round in the next Salon.

So the whole life of the *noblesse* is spent in this half-and-half way, and if we wanted a contemporary contrast to that *épluchure des grands vices*, Richelieu, we should find only, perhaps, the softly shaded miniature-character of the Duc de Nivernois. In Chapter VI of his *Considérations* Duclos traces with satirical relish the changes in the connotation of the word *noble*. The original conception, born of potent experience, of the noble as the blithe conqueror of the most savage dangers has been altered by the *fainéant* sons of stalwart sires, through a process of gradual relaxation, to the exact opposite. Nowadays who says *noble* says dainty-limbed and languid, and a robust frame points to a plebeian father.

Under the pressure of this long development even the Duc de

Nivernois had to be a mere artist in life, rather than a lord of it. True, a great soul was hidden in the frail body, and nobly revealed itself amid the blood-drunkenness of the Jacobin Terror. In serenely cultivated art and wise patronage his achievements won the approval of his best contemporaries. Yet face to face with the opposition of hard facts he shrank shyly back into himself, and so even this life, entirely shaped from within, becomes one great Almost. "Guerrier manqué, ambassadeur manqué, homme d'affaires manqué, homme de naissance manqué," Mme Geoffrin would have written with sad irony under this portrait.

So it was with the fact of a *noblesse* that ruled the nation's life, but through hereditary half-and-halfness had not kept pace with that life's onward impulse, that the prophets of vigorous ideals for the future, the *philosophes*, had to deal. And they did it in strangely half-and-half wise. True, before the burlesque vulgarity with which the Bishop of Blois tried to define the relation between *noblesse* and intellect, "Nous serions bien malheureux si les poètes n'avaient point d'épaules," men like Montesquieu are right to wrap themselves in silent contempt. Vauvenargues, who clung to his consciousness of noble birth as the last plank in the shipwreck of all life's hopes, cannot spare his peers the bitter reproach of frivolity and lack of self-control. To Rivarol the great folk he meets every day are only "les mânes de leurs ancêtres." The bitter sceptic Chamfort would fain have conceded high Society the right to exist only as the playground for his merciless wit. And to the comedy of the period it was this same class, the *noblesse*, that contributed, from Gresset's *Méchant* to Beaumarchais, the most successful types. All the same, the more the *novi homines* of the eighteenth century emerged from the thoughtful twilight of the study into the broad light of life, the more discreetly and wooingly they approached the great ones of the day. Already La Bruyère had mused, "Il y a peu de familles dans le monde qui ne touchent aux plus grands princes par une extrémité, et par l'autre au simple peuple." Voltaire, in spite of the most humiliating experiences, tried to the end of his days, and not merely from a servile spirit, to 'waist' the *noblesse* as though it were a coy *belle*. In his *Essai sur la Société des gens de lettres avec les grands* d'Alembert storms against the unworthy cringing of the great of intellect before the great of this earth, but he goes on to trace with penetration the advantages that would accrue from their united labour for the incarnation of new ideals.



*Duc de Nivernois, Duc de Nemours, Duc de Nemours*  
 DUC DE NIVERNOIS DUC DE NEMOURS DUC DE NEMOURS

THE DUC DE NIVERNOIS  
 Mezzotint after A. Ramsay





And it was none other who suffered the admiring friendship of the great Frederick to express itself in the form of a pension. The beggar's pride of Rousseau, finally, proclaimed in life and writings that only the really great lords stood above rivalry and were capable of unenvious advancement of talent.

Thus the cultural pioneers of the eighteenth century by no means fought against the existence of the *noblesse* as such: only in the end did they feel themselves strong enough to claim next to the prerogatives of birth an equally important place for the aristocracy of the mind. Their whole life's course forced these deadly foes of hereditary and acquired privilege into the freedom of movement of *grands seigneurs*, and they could not hope for the founding of their millennial kingdom from the primitive stupidity of the *canaille*. That would be guaranteed them only by a philosophic despot of the type of Frederick the Great, who would set himself boldly and with lifted visor at their head.

Now whereas the great representatives of advanced thought in the eighteenth century, Voltaire especially, often strove impetuously, and to their own undoing, from oppressive narrowness into breadth, the philosophic outsider Duclos was able with the most controlled mastery to unite jealously guarded independence with respect for superior strength in his unassailably sturdy and notorious character. Self-assured pride put him in the position of the rich man to whom nobody is necessary, and at times got him out of any affront. Witness that fine theatrical scandal at the Château Champs at Easter 1737, of which Collé gives us a wryly comical account. A troop of aristocratic swaggerers, such as the Duc d'Aumont and the Duc de Duras, the Marquis de Surgères, and the Comte de Sade, have had one or two extravagant farces specially written for them by Collé and Duclos, and, in spite of the *bourgeois* protest of the authors, are determined, egged on by the Comte, to play them on the coming Good Friday before an irreverent audience and pull a face at the Most High. The afore-mentioned Comte, however, to curry favour with Cardinal Fleury, puts the old gentleman on the track of the sacrilege. So, just as everything is astir with rehearsal of the blasphemous *chatouillement*, there falls like a thunderbolt into the *château* an *ordre du Roy*, which scares the pretty fellows back to Paris. There is scarcely time to lug along the stacks of fish and fowl and the rare wines to the Duc d'Aumont's *petite maison*, where even one or two sparsely clad little ladies are

hardly successful in detaining the fugitive young sparks. The chief victims are, of course, Collé and Duclos—love's labour lost, annoyance and expense, and, on top of that, an unexpected but right human sequel. A few days later a good friend brings Collé the news, piping hot, that at a dinner-party those fine gentlemen vented on the absent authors their spleen at the ridiculous mis-carriage of their little joke. Compliments such as "cocksure gas-bag," "clodhopper," "coffee-house scum," "*précieux* pedant," rained down on Duclos; Collé (the friend continues) was trampled into the mud as a plebeian. Snorting with rage, Collé storms off to Duclos. He hurls these endearments at his head, shrieks it is a *sacré* obligation in honour to make those whipper-snappers hold their tongues, even if it has to be done sword in hand. . . . Duclos lets him go on in this strain for a bit, listening with a little, impertinent smile; then he forces the quivering man into a chair, methodically pulls up another for himself, and sits down opposite his friend. And now he begins, in utterly dispassionate tones. To be candid, he is surprised that Collé, usually such a level-headed spectator of life, should lose his temper over fellows of that kidney. Here he lays his hand soothingly on the other's arm, who tries to get up. All the more so as the whole affair seems to be nothing but idle hearsay. "And even if 'twere the most guaranteed truth," he goes on, "what's the use of good name and outcries about revenge to us poor devils? Surely we are free to ignore those coxcombs, even if they do happen to have insulted us, with a quiet contempt that shows we are stronger than they."

Thus Duclos practises even in his passionate years the difficult art of keeping oneself, where advisable, well in the background, though others may be trying to leap forward into the full blaze of observation. Though he was always prepared for a stand-up quarrel, for, as afterward Beaumarchais, he looked upon his dealings with the great only as a truce that could issue at any moment into an open breach. Hence his conviction that fear of its ever prompt defending sword is the only thing that lets talent advance unattacked: "On fait plus pour ceux que l'on craint que pour ceux que l'on estime." Therefore, too, he tolerates no shadow of domestic thralldom, in which people like Mme de Staal-Delaunay and Rousseau bled away. Free, and their peer in intellect, he ranges himself by the side of the most eminent; and if necessary, against them. In his account of the Hoorn affair in the *Mémoires*





*secrets* he has made no secret of his popular sympathies; for his *Histoire de Louis XI* he secured, by his covert, respectful attacks on princes, the censor's ban and thereby the widest appreciation, even from Voltaire; in Académie matters he ignored delightfully the nosy parker Richelieu; and to him, as to Latour, *noblesse* conferred by Louis XV was only the written proof of already existing power.

All the same, something of the artist's delight in a centuries-long developed natural force runs through that true *locus classicus* in the *Considérations* where it is said that the people build up in the person of the aristocrat their own idol: "Le faste d'un seigneur en impose au malheureux même qui en fait les frais; il tombe dans le respect devant son ouvrage comme le sculpteur adora en tremblant le marbre dont il venoit de faire un dieu." Like Montaigne, Fontenelle, and Vauvenargues, he too sees the idol draped in *préjugés héréditaires*, and with the utmost care he distinguished between the unrestrained Court noble and the self-conscious aristocrat of the type of the Duc de Nivernois. Yes, the Breton rustic exercises his bridled strength all his life and with amusement in the intricate game of crossing and disentangling Court intrigues; for Rousseau's sullen impotence he has only the sympathetic shrug of the soul-physician, and the reproach of *homme de cour*, coming from prouder and less fortunate fellow-writers such as Buffon and d'Alembert, he can put down with a smile to the score of appreciation.

In Chapter VI of the *Considérations*, "Sur les Grands seigneurs," the mature Duclos deals genetically with the problem that even for him was the central point in life, and packs decades of experience and prophetic foresight into the razor-sharp antitheses of his style. The society of past centuries, he says, was based on the strict discrimination of classes. The *grand seigneur* alone it was who, after God accountable only to his king, gave the existence of the nation bent and purport. Since those days, however, *bourgeois* life has flowed up into the noble's palace and broken up its foundations. The self-consciousness that distance gave has degenerated to the convulsiveness with which decadent greatness tries by unfair expenditure and intimidation to hold its tottering position. Tightening up of the central government has ended by nullifying the nobility's privileges throughout the country, and has brought the born leaders of the people far from their task to a point where they

spend themselves in sterile Court cabals. The idols still stand, in the eyes of the masses, where they stood; but woe if one of them falls! The people will savagely trample it under foot in disillusioned fury.

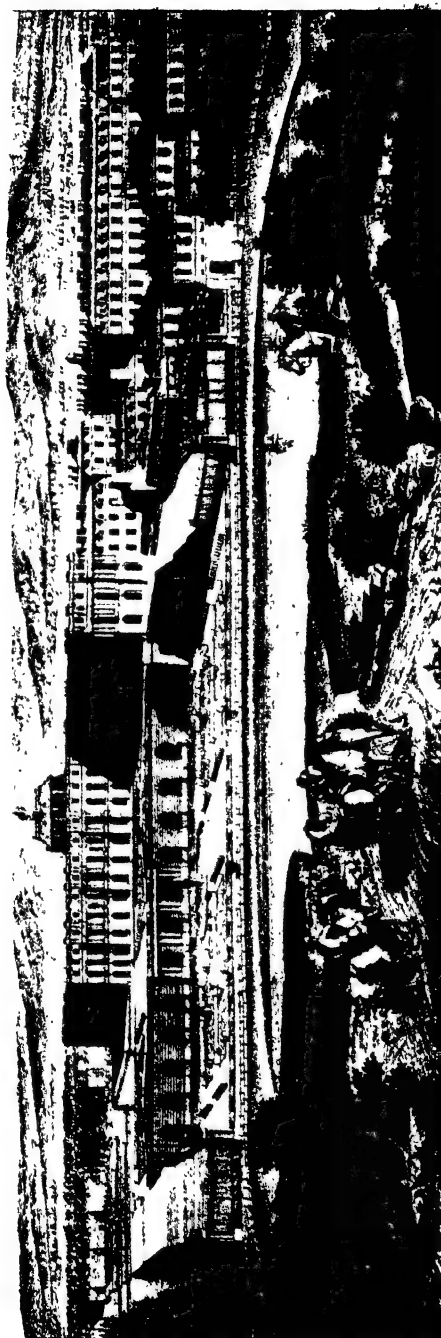
Qui a vu la cour, a vu du monde ce qui est le plus beau, le plus précieux et le plus orné; qui méprise la cour, après l'avoir vue, méprise le monde.

LA BRUYÈRE

M. de Valfons relates in his *Souvenirs* that the young Comtesse de Broglie, pent up on one occasion in Strasbourg through the fortune of war, stamped her foot in a laughing rage and cried, "Ils disent que c'est si cher de vivre à Paris! Je consens à ne leur coûter que quatre sous par jour: un cervelas et un petit pain, en faut-il davantage?" This little incident teaches us charmingly and forcibly enough to what a degree concentration of all power and amusement had changed the royal residence into the focus of all the French nobility's thoughts and aspirations. A few miles from the capital and one is buried in a rubbish-heap of outmoded ideas and sentiments. "Ceux qui vivent à quelques lieues de la capitale, en sont à un siècle pour les façons de penser et d'agir," says Saint-Foix. Then, as now, it was here in France alone that the nation's best forces were drawn like rays into a crystal of aristocratic and pleasant life; and when the connoisseur looks back at eighteenth-century Paris he will agree with Stendhal in ranking it above the chaotic hermit-community of London and the old-fashioned aristocratic oligarchy of Vienna as sole cosmopolis.

Paris, however, is only the dazzling, ever-moving background for the stiff grandeur of the sphinx Versailles. Here, in the most magnificent and dreariest palace on earth, the French *noblesse* guards its idol in eternal captivity and joss-stick burning. For, to give their own submission and degradation a show of dignity, people have made the King into a god. Like a god he is the cynosure of every eye. If he moves his whole Court rushes after him. Should he stop every one stiffens to a statue. Before the clouds on his brow the little creatures creep for shelter within themselves; a gayer glance from his eye and life is joyful again. He is a god and the joys and sorrows of mankind are not his. Truth and friendship he may not know; feelingless as fate, he metes out rank and falls heavily upon wickedness.

Over all this illusion of life there weighs like destiny the leaden



*Vue et Perspective du Château de Versailles  
Au Roy  
Versaille du Ch. de l'Orangerie*

VERSAILLES, SEEN FROM THE SWISS POND  
Engraving by Menant  
Albertina Vienna





boredom of an endless great *salon*; and a thousand fugitive spirits are bootlessly at work trying to fill the horrible desolation. The Court flocks each morning to the five-act comedy of the King's *levée*; at Mass it gathers strength and appetite for new little diversions; sleighing and the chase, amateur theatricals and *bals masqués* fill the day passably with weak emotions, wild titillation of *le jeu* the nights. Luxury becomes a tyrant ("Le superflu, chose très nécessaire," Voltaire remarks); the courtier willingly lets his limbs be laced by etiquette, and not even a smile presumes to curl his lips' corners. To interrupt by passion the graceful interchange of marriage and adultery is vastly ridiculous. A wise husband takes his wife without fuss from the school of *amants* to new enjoyments, then passes her on when he is sated to the next man—but always with a feather-light touch; and he who should permit himself to lay his arm, in company, on the back of the chair occupied by the lady he enjoyed the previous night would be guilty of gross lack of *mœurs*.

Where bodily pleasures fail recourse can be had, at any rate sometimes, to *esprit*; but to that special Court *esprit* which is a so masterly capacity for dispensing with all *esprit*. The ladies are its chosen supporters. Somebody brings up in company the great problem of war and peace; his fair neighbour listens to him enraptured, and says at the most pathetic bit, her eyes shining, that she for her part believes in the primacy of the heart in love. This thoughtful theme is being pursued into all its ramifications when suddenly a gallant *chansonnette* floats up from somewhere, and to this too the sentimental *belle* has to listen with a gentle smile. It is a matter of general regret that the singer, at the very point where the affair starts to become unequivocal, lets himself be interrupted by a prosaically *spirituel* moralist. No matter, the company follows the latter's performance with growing interest, and in fact would have heard it to the end had not that rake of a Marquis begun to tell, audibly *sotto voce*, a half-clad little story about the newly married Comtesse N. Oh, he knows it only on hearsay, and besides, the whole thing sounds unlikely in the case of such youthful virtue. Meanwhile, an *amic* of the victim has sat herself at the spinet and begun to play a *mélodie* by Grétry; some one enthuses about Rameau, and Grécourt, a dried-up chevalier, with hectic red on his badly powdered cheeks, says that he has a reply to the shameless *Esprit des lois* coming from his quill;

the little Abbé V. sends a mild *frisson* down the company's spine with the account of a gang of rogues who yesterday evening . . . At which point there impetuously jumps up a moony young *beau* who hitherto has been wrapped in an interesting silence, sweeps some cups off a little Chinese table with his coat-tails, sends a beauty's fan flying out of her hand, and nearly falls headlong over a *pouffe*, to get to a girl at the other end of the *salon* and whisper breathlessly in her ear, "Ma chère, vous êtes belle comme un ange!"

Dull dogs like Stendhal, however, maintain from experience that this sort of wit is the harshest serfdom, and Mme de Staël is supposed to have died of the social entertainments of her last winter. All the same, though, wit sharpens itself in this way to polished *méchanceté*. "La science de la cour est comme la chirurgie qui s'apprend par les blessures d'autrui."<sup>1</sup> One learns to wield the subtle science of the ridiculous as a deadly weapon on which the most formidable foe must bleed his life away. The art of boot-licking advances toward perfection, and showers on its disciples all the gifts of honestly won fame:

Quand on est riche, duc, et qu'on rampe à la cour,  
On a toujours assez de gloire.<sup>2</sup>

Like a wretched beggar who, when he counts his ha'pence at night, recks not of the kicks and cuffs he received during the day, the courtier has long ago lost any feeling of degradation. Nor would he have time for it. In the stress of Court life a man has to keep very careful watch over his mien and manner. An enemy's most piercing gaze ought not to penetrate the steel mask behind which one hatches deadly revenge, and it is with a smile on one's face that one must plunge the dagger into his back. Court favour, however, is everything. The wise courtier will obsequiously dart forward to hold an all-powerful Minister's *pot de chambre*; well he knows that soon the moment will come when he may tip it over the other's head. Without favour the most honest service of Court and country is but a lustrous blemish. For princes are spoilt children and cannot bear that anyone should forestall their whim. Indiscriminate also, even as rain and sunshine, falls the favour of kings. The friendless fellow who is in difficulties will be harshly refused the tiniest gift in the place where wealth and power bask

<sup>1</sup> Voltaire.

<sup>2</sup> Comte Lauraguais.



COMPANY IN THE SALON  
Engraving after N. Partridge



in the full enjoyment of favour; for giving to the mighty gives back glory and profit. Hence that, for all its measuredness, wild scramble after Court standing, even if only the show of it: “*La réputation d’avoir du crédit est un prix si flatteur que bien des gens en sacrifieroient la réalité à l’apparence.*”<sup>1</sup> This ambition eats into the courtier’s life as in the souls of the damned. The miser lets his gold trickle through his fingers and gloats upon it; the gambler tastes in turn all the bliss and desolation of chance; the *dévo*t is appeased by prayer, the lover by the possession of the pined-for body. The ambitious man alone is doomed to the torments of Tantalus. He lives not in himself, but in others, and how sweet and unattainable is the good luck of others! No wisdom, however smooth, no smiling contempt of humankind, the only treasures that the courtier preserves, out of his thousand-sided experience, into old age, can make up to him for having missed that. For it is too dearly bought at the price of personality. Thus the courtier is for ever driven round and round in a narrowly confined space, like an animal, without the strength to free himself from the galling yoke. He is a Simeon Stylites round whose pillar the kneeling pack whine in envious homage, but no slumber cools his scorching eyes. At times, perhaps, when he flew through the forest in his master’s hunting-train, when in a reflective moment he gazed from his mansard window in Choisy and saw the sun gradually ebb away behind the gently spiralling smoke of still homesteads, there welled up, hot and bitter, into the heart of many a one of these unhappy folk the thought that freedom, rustic peace, and a shepherd’s happy lot could be more enviable than the Court, the service of the sex, and the flash of swords. But such a thought was folly, folly, and so he shook it reluctantly from him.

A lifetime’s experience as *grand seigneur*, a thorough knowledge of human nature, and Rabelaisian humour have crystallized themselves in a delicious and profoundly meaningful dream of the Prince de Ligne, in which the subconscious, unencumbered by propriety, rises victoriously to the soul’s surface:

At last it came to my turn to be introduced at Court. In I go—but how! Naked as a worm I stand there; a brief apron makes the more noticeable those parts that it ought to screen. The royal princesses lower their gaze and laugh into their *jabots*. The eyes of their exalted mother flash lightning. The Court Marshal cries for the watch. My

<sup>1</sup> Duclos.

friends cry with rage. The ladies stare at me till the eyes are dropping out of their heads. So much I can see in spite of my confusion. I wish the earth would open and swallow me up. Convulsively I pull my apron down, but by making it longer in front I abbreviate it behind. The King gazes at me as if I were crazed. In the icy silence of the *salle* I would fain creep within myself and hide; I duck; I run—and wake up out of the dream, bathed in perspiration.

Celui qui serait né pour obéir, obéirait jusque sur le trône.

VAUVENARGUES

Louis XIV had organized the government and the royal power under one single, unbending will, whose pleasure and life's object it was to watch unceasingly over the mighty machine even to its tiniest wheel. It was with all the reluctant timidity and sloth of the descendant, however, that his great-grandson took the helm of the ship of State; and the slim aristocratic hand proved too weak to steer. Uncomprehendingly and with growing aversion he peered at the involved mechanism of government, which only a strong character would find sublimely simple. His doom and his nation's was the enervating drowsiness of mediocrity, now and then discordantly interrupted by the shriek of trampled-down herd instincts. And so boredom killed everything in his life, finally even the poor power to make an end of it.

This was not so from the very beginning. After the nightmare of the Maintenon years, after the bacchic orgies of the Regency, something like a sigh of relief went through the nation. His contemporaries make obeisance to the boy Louis XV's majesty and charm. Traits of great-hearted resolution in the boy give rise to hopes of the happiest independence in the man. A careful education seems to guarantee the harmonious development of his versatile parts. When in 1721 the King, then eleven years old, lay sick (it was said that he was poisoned) there rose a wild cry of revenge against the Regent. The Paris churches could not hold the crowds who went to pray for his Majesty, and the announcement of his eventual recovery drove the waves of national rejoicing far beyond the borders of France. "Louis XV étoit l'enfant de l'Europe." But then the humdrum duties of the monarch crept over the youth, and slowly and irremediably the King sank into the paralysing monotony of ceremonial, of that unmercifully absurd etiquette that Frederick the Great used to have mimicked before

him when he was in a bad humour, in obedience to which the Court *comparserie* had to attend day after day at the five-act comedy of the royal *levée*, that hallowed nonsense that exposed the Dauphin's nuptial consummation to the eyes of the assembled Court, and that even forced the Dauphine, at peril of life, to keep a just-born baby boy between her legs until the arrival of witnesses. There might well have been one sovereign means of escaping from this enervating wretchedness—warm-hearted and active sympathy with the nation's fate. This king, however, turned even his country's shame at Rossbach only into a *bon mot* at the expense of the defeated general: "Le pauvre Soubise [a notorious cuckold], il ne lui manque plus que d'être content !" And so the only way left of escaping this merciless *ennui* was to flee before it. Before it he fled, like Ahasuerus, from *château* to *château*, often to the detriment of urgent affairs of State. When he rode out on wild chases of the stag and the boar it was at his shoulder, it grimaced at him from the stage of the Théâtre des Petits Appartements, and before it he buried his face, shuddering, in the bosoms of his mistresses.

This *ennui* was born of weakness, and to weakness, in an inevitable circle, it led back. "Au conseil, on lui ferait signer sa condamnation," writes Cardinal Tencin in 1744 to Richelieu. Faced with the determined opposition of the Parlement of Paris, the disconcerted monarch could only utter the threats of a frightened child whose toy has slipped out of its hands. Weakness showed itself in his sickbed repentance at Metz in 1744, when he was laid low as the effect of wild nights of love with Mme de la Tournelle, repulsive flabbiness appeared in that comedy of remorse, after Damiens's attempt at assassination in 1757, that might almost have cost the state its sole prop, La Pompadour. Reluctantly and with impotent shame this king confessed after Fontenoy and Bergen-op-Zoom that France owed its highest martial fame in the eighteenth century to two foreigners, Maurice de Saxe and General Loewendahl. Mme du Barry set the Duc d'Aiguillon as Minister metaphorically at her lover's throat; and Richelieu had the effrontery to dismiss an applicant *because* he came with a strong recommendation from the King.

Weak and unstable as he was, this ruled ruler did possess one characteristic: he clung to custom. For him, whom inner emptiness made a helpless slave of his surroundings, it must have been



a torture to see familiar faces change. Hence the statuesque stiffness with which he received strange visitors; that childish, anxious clinging to the skirts of the favourite of the moment to which La Pompadour owed her twenty years' reign; the torment in which he tossed, before Choiseul's downfall, between the proved ability of his best Minister and the familiar kisses of Mme du Barry.

It is clear that this man, just because, like a child, he was dependent upon others, had no affection to spare for them. Only once in his life did he shed tears, and that was at Lekain's performance in Crébillon's *Rhadamiste et Zénobie*. The people's beseeching, soon threatening cry for the lightening of their harsh burden scares the weakling still deeper into his selfishness, and extorts from his wan lips only the horrible remark, "Les choses, comme elles sont, dureront autant que moi." It sounds like grotesque irony when Bachaumont tells us that the old lecher once, in conversation with the King of Denmark, referred to the French people with a father-of-his-country gesture as his big family, whose happiness was his life's aim.

Hand in hand with this naïvely shameless egoism went the frivolous cruelty of the decadent libertine. Even as a boy Louis had once in childishly malicious sport shot an arrow at the Grand Prévôt de Souches, of which the old man almost died. In his *Journal* the Duc de Croy describes the day when the King, in the presence of the whole Court, wallowed in all the horrible details of Damiens's execution—the most brutal torture that men have ever yet inflicted on a poor creature of that sort. And this monster more than once took a carrion delight in toying with the chances of death of courtiers who were lying ill.

Against this full and overflowing measure of negative weakness one or two creative traits weigh pitifully lightly. Contemporary accounts praise the monarch's gift for witty conversation among his intimates, the graceful way, for example, he once silenced the bitter cavilling of his companions at table against a Government measure that had just been passed: "Chut, chut ! Voilà le Roi qui vient !" The mordant criticisms of his "Court fool," the Marquis de Courtenvaux, he rather ignored than tolerated, and to snatch the poor soul Damiens from the devilish clutches of the judges was too mild an ebullition of noble feeling.

And, last, his felinely sly and felinely spiteful secret diplomacy. "Ce n'est jamais la fermeté, la dignité, même un coup de vigueur



THE PARK AT MARLY  
Engraving by Moreau le Jeune



qui brouille les états ; c'est un mot," says the Prince de Ligne, who won his statesman's spurs at the Court of Louis XV. A word or two about La Pompadour, dropped half in jest *dans les coulisses* by the great Frederick, kindled the impotent hatred of the little Louis and drove the former allies into a life-and-death struggle in the Seven Years War. So, as diplomacy on the grand scale was too hopelessly involved, Louis XV wasted a not commonplace statesmanlike talent on the backstairs sort. His squabble with the perverse spy d'Éon filled Europe with malicious laughter. The King's Black Cabinet made even the quiet Quesnay's spleen boil over sometimes, and starving hacks are said to have published pamphlets against the Government to ensure snug winter quarters in the Bastille at the State's expense.

Thus Louis XV as monarch is the laughing-stock of his century and after: as human being, however, he is a sad disgrace to humanity.

This man, handsome in the heroic mould, knows only one manly pleasure that at moments enables him to escape the misery of being a king—a passion, carried almost to the pitch of madness, for the chase. All the rest of his fight against boredom is a guerilla warfare with women troops. Even in the fit of ague before his last illness he himself made the coffee for his intimate guests at night. At knotting and tatting this modern Sardanapalus put to shame the deffest feminine fingers, and Casanova lauds the intoxicating fragrance of the attar Louis liked to distil with his own careful hand from the rose-petals of the Trianon—30,000 livres the pound. Even in the travail of science and philosophy, bringing to birth a new era, the King showed only a woman's titillating curiosity. For days on end he used to shut himself up with the wizard Saint-Germain in the smoky witches' kitchen of the Trianon; and he, who usually groaned at the thought of letting even the tiniest sum out of his privy purse, surrendered to this remarkable sage, at enormous expense, the very suite of rooms at the Château Chambord where the soul of Maurice de Saxe, who had just died, still ruled. Then his interest switched capriciously on to architecture and gardening; flickered swiftly up, and yet more swiftly died down, over La Pompadour's labours with the Court theatre at Versailles; lingered a moment before the portraits of Nattier and Latour, with the latter of whom the King had many an amusing tiff during sittings; and is said even to have lured the usually

unapproachable prince, in the relaxed atmosphere of intimate society, to compete with the lyric-writers of his *entourage*.<sup>1</sup> Unlike his forbear Louis XIV, however, who once humiliated his Court by having a separate table laid for himself and Molière, this haughtier monarch usually kept the *canaille* of poets with strange obstinacy at arm's length. True, for the petty scribblers who enjoyed Court favour, the Tressans, Bernards, Moncrifs, a better servants' table stood always spread in the royal *châteaux*. Voltaire, however, who had become the scourge of the nobility, the King icily rebuffed, nor even hesitated, when the poet was fleeing from Prussia, to forbid him his native land, thus setting a deadly enemy in wait at his realm's door.

Thus this unhappy prince, in his half-and-half way, missed all the strong, simple pleasures that can make worth while the life of a full, active nature. But it was on woman, multiform epitome of all possible delights, that his weakling's eagerness for pleasure came completely to grief.

Nietzsche somewhere distinguishes, with the smiling aloofness of a discarnate spirit, between the cosmic views of the master and the morality of the menial. And, indeed, what is the import to the mighty man of this earth of the swarm of antlike creatures about his feet, or of their cries, when in heedlessness or sport he tramples upon them? Nay, there is something of horrible beauty in that unutterable torment of countless thousands out of which the pyramid tombs of the Pharaohs rose to heaven; cruelly beautiful is that gruesome spectacle of lions quivering on the cross whereby the Carthaginians loved to proclaim their lordship of the desert; the voluptuous orgies of Cesare Borgia, the bowstring justice of Henry VIII, may be looked upon as the lithe springs of beautiful wild beasts. In history there is but one deadly sin, which is mediocrity. And the downtrodden wretch himself moaningly adores might as his destiny, if it keeps its foot firmly planted upon his neck. As long as the eighteenth-century French expected strength from their King, even his vices were only the obverse of his vigour. When the slaves found their master was a weakling, his vices mere hobbies, they wreaked a terrible revenge upon his grandson.

Certainly the impartial observer must admit that Louis's married lot inevitably drove the unassuaged young man along the by-

<sup>1</sup> *Les Plaisirs de Choisy*.



LOUIS XV AS A YOUTH  
Engraving after H. Rigaud  
Museum, Vienna



paths. Marie Leszczyńska, a young girl brought up in old-maidish fashion, without a trace of bodily or mental charm, daughter of a Polish refugee gone bankrupt on his throne, had been hauled by the basest feminine intrigues out of her White Mountains obscurity into the brilliance of the foremost crown in Europe. To the boyishly ardent King this woman, his senior by years, brought only a motherly affection; her fear of ghosts and her insomnia scared her bedfellow away, and her constant shiveriness even under mountains of down made conjugal delight a torture for her impetuously exacting mate. So when the Queen is only too soon compelled to cool her need for love in the little stories her ladies tell—a *penchant* in which she was not a whit behind the satyr Louis XV; when in the loneliness that steadily grows round her she associates more and more with the *coterie* of Luynes, Tressan, Hénault, and Moncrif for insipid gossip and the practice of philanthropy; and even when, faced with her husband's shocking infidelities, she sinks on her knees before the flower-decked skull of Ninon de l'Enclos, to draw fresh power of resignation from this symbol of mortality, there will creep over the observer of this ineffectual life, besides compassion, an undefined feeling of equalizing justice.

In the person of the Dauphin Louis, again, there grew up gradually a covert rebel against his heedless father. His 'Polish' character, mingled dreaminess and vacillation, made the heir to the throne pass for harmless; but this decadent scion of the Bourbons was obsessed by woman, taking a merely animal kind of relish in the contours of the female form. This expressed itself at first in elephantine jests about the sexual difference, and ended as a *tartuferie* that crossed itself at sight of a bare bosom. So for him his father's sweethearts were sheer Circes. His other qualities were Jesuitical pietism, sturdy opposition to the philosophical trend of the age (though the Court, led by La Pompadour, more and more surrendered to it), and a peasant's simplicity and stinginess. So when, in 1765, this dim life ended, before its time, by consumption, the nation, even though it saw the father prostrated, could not make up its mind whether to rejoice or grieve.

Even Mesdames de France, moreover, took an active part in the conspiracy of the pious against the King, thus requiting by Christian charity the tenderness their father had shown toward none but them. For only in the company of these unattractive girls would anything like family affection and ease come upon the



homeless King. A father's love, unavowed, shines through those pet-names, of Rabelaisian patness, with which he liked to tease his daughters in hours of intimacy. Mme Victoire was Coche; Mme Adélaïde, Chiffe; Mme Sophie, Graille; Mme Louise, Loque. And over their innocent youth he, the unscrupulous libertine, watched jealously amid the corruption of the Court. Not that this could prevent the ladies, to the shocked surprise even of Casanova, from stalking in dignified semi-nudity behind their King and father at Court festivities, occasionally, like the Amazonian Mme Adélaïde, bandying endearments with one of the royal guards, blooming anew in the youthful pertness of a Beaumarchais. For the first time, round their father's infectious deathbed, the old maids repaid, with interest, their childhood's debt by self-forgetful attention.

And so each hold upon fulfilled married happiness—emotional completion through his wife, rebirth in his children—was denied from youth onward to this anchorless man. What wonder that, at first timidly, then with the recklessness of unpunished vice, he clutched at the substitute toward which the time's riot of pleasure, and Court tradition, bore him along from all sides, and his turbid Bourbon blood imperiously urged him! For already at the age of twelve the boy had had his place assigned to him, by the *roués* of the Regency, in the motley procession of royal hedonists. Henri II and Charles IX had loved women, Henri III boys; Henri IV had reverted to women, his effeminate son to male paramours; then women had had the great Louis under their thumb for fifty long years; and now at last the turn of the catamite had come again. Hence the scenes of unutterable licence in which the smooth-cheeked boys of Versailles wallowed at night under the windows of the young King: with such success that he had to be entrusted to experienced sibyls at Chantilly for his education in matters of love. Hence Cardinal Fleury's arrangement of a royal marriage that could not be prejudicial to his own influence, and that grotesquely comic installation of the bridal pair on their nuptial night which Richelieu describes with Petronian relish. From this turbulent school of love, however, the Prince brought away into manhood nothing but an unbounded lust for women and a satyr's delight in obscene scandals, in search of which even in old age he used to ferret through police reports and break open letters. Nature had breathed over the King a deceptive charm of manliness,



FIGURE ESPAGNOLE

*Descent de Louis par Le Duc de Bourgogne, de St. Ren, d'après le Tableau peint  
par C. L. W. de la Chapelle, à L'Ordre du Roy et son premier Maître*

LOUIS XV IN THE SIBYLS' CIRCLE

Engraving after Carle van Loo



which by itself would have been quite enough to captivate the ladies of the Court, even if his semi-divine position had not made him the goal of all feminine desire. "Princes et rois vont très vite en amour," gibes Voltaire, and the quiet heroism of that Mme de Périgord who buried herself in rustic solitude to escape the King's roving eye remained distressingly unique.

For all his commonplaceness as an *amant* Louis's earliest vagaries are not without human interest and even an heroic quality. It was only by degrees that he slid unresistingly down the slope of evil habits until he reached a depth of contemptibleness which even the people could not stand. When, after the King's unsuccessful attempt at marriage, the intrigues of Mme de Tencin and the old fox Fleury had guided the ugly and gentle Mme de Mailly into the insatiable young man's bed, the nation heaved a sigh of relief to think that amorous follies would for the first time make the hunting maniac human. But even the breath-catching, *chatouillant* consciousness of sin, under the impulse of which the man of twenty-nine filled up the intervals of pleasure with repentance, could not make this unnatural *liaison* last, and two of her sisters, La Vintimille and La Lauraguais, forced the silly cry-baby into a convent. Their triumph was short, for they in their turn had now to see how the passion that immediately blazed up in the King for the Marquise de la Tournelle, their youngest sister, entirely consumed the past. Full of charm and aware of her beauty's worth, and torn from the self-abandon of her love for the Duc d'Angenis, this woman, afterward Duchesse de Châteauroux, had yielded only with hesitation and on hard terms to the stormy wooing of the victoriously handsome King. But when she did it became an obligation of honour for her to wake the prince in her lover. She drove him out of the stifling atmosphere of the Château de Versailles to the open battlefields of Flanders; through her influence he hastened to imperilled Alsace, to hurl the enemy back across the Rhine. And at the very moment when he lay, frightened to death, on his sickbed in Metz, as the result of sensual excesses, and delivered the defenceless woman into the clutches of a fanatical pack of priests, there flew through the whole land at her instigation (in Vadé's poem) the name "Well-beloved," which the King would perhaps have grown to deserve if this Egeria had guided him longer. But in the midst of her quickly restored control over him, her political schemes, and her growing sympathy with the young

philosophical movement, death suddenly snatched her away; and her lover, in the *naïve* egoism of his emotion, of the only real love a woman had ever inspired in him, could cry over her grave only, "Être malheureux tout le reste de ma vie!"

Already, however, the lively grace of the little d'Étioles, afterward Mme de Pompadour, was there to intrude itself gently between the King and his sad memories of the dead. Once again began the old game, played this time with *bourgeois* blood and softly subdued strength, of the flesh, enslavement of the King's mind, and political thralldom: then, when the woman in Mme de Pompadour had died, the decline into the nameless vices of the Parc-aux-Cerfs. Valets round up girls for him like game; he scarcely thinks it advisable to see, for example, the O'Morphi in Boucher's portrait from the nude before he enjoys her. Undressing scenes, catechism lessons, prayer before and after pleasure have to whip up his nerves, and often the thrashings and obscenities of back streets. Even the loathing of the little victims sharpens his lust, as when a child of nine hisses at her seducer, "Je te déteste, tu es laid comme une bête!" Eventually the damaged fruits fall, with a round sum as hush-money, into the lap of the provincial *noblesse*, and only one of these *petites maîtresses*, the raven-haired odalisque Mlle Romans, had made La Pompadour begin to tremble.

From this abyss of depravity even the gutter love affair with La du Barry betokens a sort of rise, at least in delicacy of management, which this *drôlesse du Roi* soon mastered. How the old Rococo *seigneur*, who had nothing more to give love than painful sobriety, must have revelled in the charm of, say, that morning scene when the Comtesse, with the clear laughter of a street *gamin*, leaped naked out of bed among the most dignified male company, stretched out one little foot for the Papal Nuncio to put a shoe on, entrusted the other to the care of the Grand Aumônier, flipped her fingers under the nose of an austere *notaire*, and then fell upon the neck of her well-beloved! How captivating, too, the archly disrespectful gesture with which, just awakened from the cloudy lace and rustling silk of the royal bed, she dug her fingers into her sleeping lover's ribs: "Oh, prends donc garde, La France, ton café fout le camp!" This care-free priestess of engaging vice was unfit, however, for the difficult political *rôle* the royal family and ecclesiasticism tried to persuade her to undertake after the tears and prayers of the "Court sages" had not been able to turn the King's



LE RENAI.

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*Expos. Suppl. à l'Expos. de 1889.*



eyes toward virtue. Her great weapon in the fight for the caprices of a spoilt child were those tears that Louis kissed from her eyelashes with trembling promises. To such innocent, childish tears M. de Choiseul owed his reverberating downfall, and the Duc d'Aiguillon the luck of stepping into the great man's shoes. The daughter of the people repaid the implacable hatred of the birth-proud Prince de Beauvau by degrading his sister, wife of the Maréchal Mirepoix, to the duties of a chambermaid. As for the haughty disdain of the *philosophes*, with whom she neither could nor would have anything to do, for this *objet de luxe* it simply did not exist. For she sought to be nothing more than a dispenser of love, that eighteenth-century love that dismissed deep, genuine affection to Fairyland and enthroned woman's body for worship. She thought she was ministering to love when she sat by the King's deathbed, and his pock-foul hands caressed her bare bosom, that wonderful breast he had never been tired of kissing. Then, with the sound conscience of *naïve* vice, she went into banishment. Her innocence was untroubled there by the horrible joke of the *grande courtisane* Sophie Arnould before the royal bier, "Nous voilà orphelins de père et de mère," or the cowardly inscription on the grave :

Remplissant ses honteux destins,  
Louis a fini sa carrière.  
Pleurez, coquins ; pleurez, putains ;  
Vous avez perdu votre père.

The nation's appraisal had followed this swift decline of a royal career, that at first had raised the highest hopes, only from a distance and with hesitation. "Le caractère des Français demande du sérieux dans le souverain," La Bruyère had already said, and the happy-go-lucky French took even the youthful Louis XV in dead earnest. The *discours de réception* of Voltaire and Duclos in the Académie simply sum up gracefully the homage of a whole nation. Even in 1744, just as the King was tossing, a prey to the pangs of cowardly remorse, on his sickbed at Metz, and the proscribed partner of his pleasures and greatness, Mme de Châteauroux, was being hounded in a secret coach toward an obscure doom, there fluttered forth from the capital all over the country a simple little song, repeated by a thousand hearts and lips :

Doit-on mettre autour de son buste :  
Louis le Grand ; Louis le Juste ?  
Ces noms qu'il a bien mérités,  
D'autres déjà les ont portés.



Qu'un titre nouveau le décore :  
 Qu'il soit Louis le Bien-Aimé,  
 Dans ce mot tout est renfermé.<sup>1</sup>

True, the satirical Voltaire sneers, when the King's recovery is reported, that Paris has never lapsed more irremediably into a debauch of jubilation, fireworks, and a flood of bad verse; and Casanova asserts that he felt France loved the King only because he bore the name of "Well-beloved." Still, round about 1750 something like a last lull of happiness before the storm must have lain over the land. France's military honour lay untarnished in the able hands of Maurice de Saxe, prince and Court fought against *ennui* with a strength that was still fresh, and the people were not yet in their death-throes under the crushing burden of taxation. It was at this same period, however, that the King began to avoid the Paris mob by making a *détour* along the specially constructed road to Saint-Denis; and though even in 1757, after Damiens's insane attempt, something like a wave of indignation rolled through the realm, it was surely the momentum of the force of gravity, which goes on working long after the original impetus has died away.

The *philosophes*, however, did not need this external impetus. To them enlightened despotism, even in the guise of a Louis XV, was the sole guarantee of free development of thought, all superstitions of the time notwithstanding. From this conviction Turgot does not hesitate to explain this King's oysterish shrinking in all matters of decision by lack of self-confidence; indeed, for him the century of the fifteenth Louis is one of the most adventurous periods of humanity's advance toward science and philosophy. Quesnay wanted to place him as the standard-bearer of philosophy at the head of the philosophic guild; and Galiani, before the King's bier, sums up years of passionate share in France's fortunes in the exhaustive words, "Le règne de Louis XV sera mémorable à la postérité. . . . C'était un honnête homme, qui faisait le plus vilain des métiers (celui des rois) le plus à contre-cœur qu'il pouvait."

It is therefore one of history's most ironic *bons mots* that these same *philosophes* laid the intellectual foundations of that rebellion against the royal power that grew from 1750 onward. *Fronder* against an inaccessible central Government has lain from all time in a Frenchman's very blood. "La France est une monarchie

<sup>1</sup> Vadé.



MMF DE CHÂTEAU  
J.-M. Nattier



absolue, tempérée par des chansons," says Chamfort, and even the disgrace of Rossbach had borne a delightful couplet to the royal ears. But now the carnival gaiety of these satirical songs in which Court idlers and an excitable people, debarred from the management of its own fate, had liked in former days to give vent to ire and scorn and whim turned to bitter earnest. Now it became the fashion in 'philosophic' circles to make political theory go hand in hand with actual life, and women took the lead in this dangerous game, as previously they had been foremost in tying *nœuds* or cutting out jumping-jacks. To the panting masses, however, the fun and wit of the light-winged *chansonnette* had long ago become things of the past, and in the wild howls of the mob behind the coffin of the fifteenth Louis—"Taïaut ! Taïaut ! Voilà le plaisir des dames ! Voilà le plaisir !" —there gasps already the hatred of the Revolution.

O France ! Une femelle  
Fit toujours ton destin ;  
Ton bonheur vient d'une puceille  
Et ton malheur d'une catin.

*Verses found on the gate of Versailles, October 1759*

The Duchesse de Bourgogne, granddaughter by marriage of Louis le Grand, once asked La Maintenon in malicious fun, "Do you know, Auntie, why the queens of England have a better time on the throne than the kings?" and, as the old Sultana looked at her in questioning unsuspicion, answered her own riddle, "Because men rule under the *régime* of women, and women in the name of kings." Thus a woman gives its true name, in the saucy fancy of the moment, to the destiny of the last two hundred years of French monarchy, Woman.

Particularly, though, to the destiny of the eighteenth-century monarchy.

Celui qui est à la cour, à Paris et dans les provinces, qui voit agir des ministres, des magistrats, des prélats, s'il ne connaît les femmes qui les gouvernent, est comme un homme qui voit une machine qui joue, mais qui n'en connaît pas les ressorts.<sup>1</sup>

At the beginning of the century Mme de Maintenon was the gear-wheel of the whole machine of State (though this might, and

<sup>1</sup> Montesquieu.

did, squeak in every spring). The Regent had often only seemed to extricate himself from the intrigues of Mme de Parabère and company. Mme de Prie, in her *complot* with the brothers Pâris, more than once threw dust in the sound eye of the one-eyed ministerial Duc de Bourbon; and it is her injured hussy's pride the nation must thank when the Duc's beautiful and energetic sister, Mlle de Vermandois, has to yield her chance of becoming queen to the limp prudery of a Marie Leszczyńska, and the King only too soon seeks intoxicating relief from indifferent wedlock in the arms of mistresses: to such extent as that old Tartuffe Fleury did not have an oily finger in the pie—who, rebuffed by the Queen with astonishment and disgust, supposed he would have to strike at his enemy through her husband's heart—or, indeed, Goody Tencin did not serve up to the scarce reluctant King one of her political love-potions, brewed with Richelieu's aid, to bring her brother the Cardinal to the helm of State.

Le Maurepas est chancelant,  
Voilà ce que c'est d'être impuissant,

sang the friends of La Châteauroux in the hearing of this genial misogynist, who, however, summoned up sufficient strength of soul to mime for the benefit of an intimate circle the fate that threatened him according to celebrated examples, before he indeed went, with a saucy *chansonnette* to La Pompadour's *Fleurs blanches*, into exile. The Comte d'Argenson, again, neither the weightiest services nor yet years of petty warfare, waged with grim care and feminine auxiliaries against La Pompadour, could preserve from the same fate.

This woman was like a cat, however, in the way she played with her chubby-cheeked, petted boy, Bernis. He, as cadet of an ancient, foundering provincial family, would long have embittered his youth in the seminary of Saint-Sulpice had he not soon ventured the bold leap into the proscribed life of a Paris *abbé*. When the peevish Fleury threatened for this to withdraw henceforth all his patronage from the prodigal son, the self-confident Bernis, with a cutting "Monseigneur, j'attendrai," turned his back on the old man and thereby slammed behind himself the door to a career that could lead to Church honours only through the clinging briars of clerical ambition. "Alors il résolut de faire une grande fortune, puisqu'il ne pouvait parvenir à une petite, et il n'y trouva que des facilités," smiles that student of men Duclos, who, for all his superiority,



MME DU BARRY

Vigée-Lebrun

*Collection Wilkinson, Paris — Photo: W.*



followed the friend of his youth's meteoric rise half dazzled. So hard up that his patrons often had to slip three livres into his hand for his *fiacre*, the youngster nevertheless made his *début* in fashionable Paris life with elegance and resolution. Ancient *noblesse*, cherubically chubby cheeks, and winsome features dominated by a high forehead and witty eyes, a frivolous distinction of manner, and a winning frankness of character had quickly procured the unknown young man reputation and patrons. Chief of all, however, was a happy and easy gift for writing elegant light verses, which ladies loved to pin like posies to their corsage. *Babet la Bouquetière*, sneers Voltaire, and Grimm put this little knick-knack of a man in his place: "Autrefois les femmes avaient des fous, des singes, puis des nègres, et enfin des poètes dans le goût de l'abbé de Bernis." Then the good fortune of a summer's day in 1745 led the amusing *homme de société* in the Princesse de Rohan's coach to Étioles, the little *châtelaine* of which, not yet become the great Pompadour, sighed after the first kisses of the King, then tarrying in Flanders, and in the meanwhile was beginning to die of boredom. So the gay young man with his thousand Parisian quips and quirks fell like a gift from heaven into this loneliness, and friendship grew closer when the adroit rhymier began to lend all the smooth suavity of his style to the woman's letters to her distant lover. Mme de Pompadour rewarded her *pigeon pattu* by making him her Court laureate, to whom she granted with a coquettish *moue* even the poetic unclothing of her most intimate secrets:

Sur le sein de ma bergère  
 Qui ne sent que le muguet  
 Je voulus verser naguère  
 Un plein flacon d'eau d'œillet.  
 Ah ! dit-elle mécontente,  
 Je ne puis y consentir,  
 Et je veux que cela sente  
 Ce que cela doit sentir.

And then in swift succession the royal favours were showered on La Pompadour's *protégé*: a seat in the Académie at the age of thirty, an apartment in the Tuileries and a pension from the privy purse, membership of the Court of Love of the Petits Appartements, appointment as Ambassador to Venice. Here the pupil began at once to follow in his mistress's footsteps by his masterly conduct of a tangle of intrigues, political and amatory, of which Casanova has left us a roguish account. And when at last La Pompadour



gave this supposed pliant catpaw the formal government of the realm to play with, there suddenly stepped straight out of the *soutane* the great statesman. Henceforth no cooing at the feet of spoilt ladies of fashion, no wanton *chansonnettes*, no nights of revelry. People saw now with amazement, by the results, that behind the childlike, smiling mien of the *bonhomme* was hidden a sound knowledge of mankind, the capability of shouldering a Herculean load of unsleeping toil, and the most consummate art in managing men. On the eve of the Seven Years War this far-seeing brain had the Duc de Nivernois sent on a mission to the Court of Berlin, to win Frederick of Prussia back to things French; and it was not his fault if mistrust of Louis XV's colonial plans had already driven the King of Prussia into England's arms. So then Bernis must, against his better judgment, yield to his monarch's desire to be revenged against the insolent scoffer, that "Marquis de Brandenburg," and squander his abilities and forces on the alliance with Austria, which afterward did France's position in the world such grievous harm. Even here, though, he tried to do his job thoroughly. Duclos tells us of the anxious care with which his friend watched over the progress of the treaty; how Bernis kept his conferences with the Austrian representative Starhemberg hidden in the gloom of Duclos's apartment in the Luxembourg, whither the parties used to come by separate and secret ways; and how completely this caution succeeded in hiding even from an intimate circle a political development that was to transform the ancient countenance of Europe. This same statesman, though, when the events of the war began to prove his misgivings true, put similar energy into the service of a speedy peace; and when his former patroness in cold fury dealt him a stab from ambush he went unbowed into banishment. Unbowed, but not without regret, if we may believe the account of the scene in which the Cardinal took a cool and melancholy leave of the woman who had been the companion of his blithe ascent. "Nous séparer, à la bonne heure, rien de plus simple et de plus facile, . . . mais pourquoi un coup de poignard?" To the world of his youth the aspiring prelate had long ago bid farewell, as is proved by that spiritual bond, spun through years of intimate correspondence, with the devout daughter of La Geoffrin, Mme de la Ferté-Imbault. But the biggest proof of all is that scant, solitary passage where his memoirs mention Duclos; and that only to accept the general



*Madame La Comtesse du Barry.*

MMI DU BARRY IN BOY'S CL  
Engraving after Drouais



judgment of the age on the latter's honesty and outstanding wit. Yet the little Abbé had dedicated one of his youthful poems to this already famous author, each Académie *séance* drew the colleagues closer, and they even came together to pay their homage at La Pompadour's toilet-table. Not until the Cardinal, then in the lustre of his Roman exile, was doing the honours on his ungrateful country's behalf to the eminent and intellectual of all Europe did a sort of second blossoming of the *homme du monde* seem to have taken place in him, even if we admit that Sade's account, in *Juliette*, of the old gentleman liking to recite Piron's priapic ode before cachinnatory guests may be perpetuating *médissant* gossip.

La Pompadour's first creature, Bernis, was scarcely out of her hands before she prepared to place a second actor on the world stage, and this time for good. He was the Comte de Stainville, afterward Duc de Choiseul. It is true that already at an early date this man had displayed his amiable ugliness, of the bulldog sort, his elegant and merciless wit, and his impetuous temperament in the Paris *salons*, and gained the valuable reputation of being *méchant* and an *espèce*. Magnificence, impudent rakishness, and an open hand had made him dangerous to the sex, in spite of Duclos's scornful comment, "Ce qui prouve que tout le monde peut prétendre au rôle d'homme à bonnes fortunes." And this continued until and after his marriage with the charming and wealthy Mlle Crozat, who passed with this woman-hunter through the century of faithlessness as one of its few examples of touching conjugal faith. But the Comte for the first time co-ordinated all the parts of his versatile character, especially his gifts as a statesman, when he entered the circle of La Pompadour by means of a coldly calculated move that surrendered to this long-mocked *maîtresse en titre* the love-secret of an ascendant rival belonging to his own house, Mme de Choiseul-Romanet. With this betrayal the unillusioned cynic made obeisance to the woman in La Pompadour. And from now onward the whole man, his suddenly wakened marvellous capacity for work, his gift for swiftly seizing on the essential in others' detail, his lucid fluency of speech, were at the favourite's disposal. It was he who sent the courier that drove Prince Soubise to the catastrophe of Rossbach. Then he took the burden of State affairs from the shoulders of the tottering Bernis on to his own. Under his patroness's eye he fired the vacillating King with fresh will to war, and used all his force to buttress the anxious woman's

own resolve to pursue the hopeless struggle. As La Pompadour's champion he took the field against the Jesuits, and he pulled the last props from the shadowy life of the Dauphin in such a way that after the latter's early death slander hinted at poison. The memory of his departed woman friend even drove this courtier, usually so wary, into an arrogant and unavailing petty war against La du Barry, that big child who impressed her dislike of the refractory 'servant' on the King in dangerously charming pouts—as when, playing catch with two oranges, she kept on shouting, "Saute Choiseul, saute Praslin<sup>1</sup>!" or when, after a brisk bout of words with a cook who resembled her *bête noire*, she whispered to her lover at table, "J'ai chassé aujourd'hui mon Choiseul, quand chasserez-vous le vôtre?" It could not console Mme du Barry's enemies that the Duc went into exile before a child's almighty power with a smile on his lips, and even blew a kiss to the odalisque's windows on the morning of his last ride out from Versailles; for Court and town sighed in France's shameful humiliation for the last and most powerful tool of the Pompadour age, which now vanished into the past like a tale that is told:

Ta grandeur est à toi, nul ne peut la ravir.  
Le jour de ton exil, le plus beau de ta vie,  
Met le comble à ta gloire, et c'est pour nous punir  
Que l'aveugle destin fait triompher l'envie.

The Prince de Beauvau wrung permission from the King to visit the Choiseuls at their country seat of Chanteloup, offering to resign his governorship of Languedoc, no matter in what poverty this step might land him. But it was the *philosophes* who were most deeply wounded in their dreams for humanity. True, some of them, such as Duclos and d'Alembert, sheltered by La Pompadour's pinions, had allowed themselves the luxury of personal dislike of the Minister; but now that there was a set-to with the du Barry faction over despotic caprice *versus* freedom, the cohort of innovators marched as one man behind the paladin of the unforgettable. The offer of an Académie seat, however, to bind the Duc definitely to philosophic affairs came too late; and Diderot gives an impressive account of the scene when the report of the "great Pan's" overthrow fell like a thunderbolt among Holbach's Table Round: "On se leva de table, on fondit en larmes. 'Tout est perdu!' s'écrièrent-ils. La scène fut très touchante."

<sup>1</sup> The Duc's cousin and Minister of Marine.



CARDINAL BERNIS  
Engraving after A. Callot  
National Library, Vienna





## LA POMPADOUR



AND now for the charmingly human goddess into whose hands flowed for twenty years (1744–64) the political and cultural fortunes of the French people. Let Court envy, unable to forgive a *bourgeoise* her unheard-of rise to the coveted position of *maîtresse en titre*, drag even the human being in this woman into the dust; let the Jesuits seek with fanatical hatred to consign their ruthless enemy to damnation as a Jezebel; let revolutionary journalism pelt “the King’s w——” with mud, to bury the tottering throne along with her; and let the Goncourts, even, put under their magnificent and colourful sketch of this unique woman the terrible verdict, “Rare exemple de laideur morale”—for all that, it is none the less true that in her sphere the *esprit* peculiar to the French people finally revealed itself in the most perfect form of which the nation of elegance was capable—in the amazing bloom of a luxury-culture without peer. In the face of this imperishable glory what signifies the trifling sum of thirty-six millions La Pompadour cost her people, or Diderot’s croaking over the handful of ashes whereto all this magnificence sank? Two centuries have given the prophets the lie; the last rightly crowned queen of fashion is more alive to-day in the yearning of a cultureless generation than her whole epoch; and though La Bruyère says only rigid virtue, divorced from any particular fashion, will pass beyond the bounds of time and space, Mme de Pompadour



teaches us in her human weakness that smiling vice too is assured of immortality.

One or two austere virtues, nevertheless, helped this woman to rise; for instance, an almost masculine power of self-control, which enabled her to place the flawless grace of her body at the King's disposal only by degrees and with every security of recompense; a wealth of acquired parts, such as perfectly educated taste, a carefully cultivated voice, and very versatile book-learning; together with perseverance in the reverses of the daily warfare and the most shrewd knowledge of mankind, by which she turned the ruling motives of the wills of others as swiftly as lightning to her own advantage. To what end, though, were all these precious excellences of mind and character? To entomb an ardent ambition in the true hell of a mistress's wretched life. Duclos's dreadful verdict on the dead Maintenon applies far more aptly to La Pompadour: "Si l'on dévoile la vie intérieure des favorites, on aura pitié d'un état si envié." More than once the proud woman poured forth this misery on the bosom of her *femme de chambre*, du Hausset: "Ma vie est comme celle du chrétien, un combat perpétuel." Her letters echo with the regrets of a life that has proved a failure, and Mme Geoffrin's daughter tells us, on the friend of her youth's own confession, that even in the hours of her greatest splendour La Pompadour invoked death as deliverer from the desperate torment of her existence. Thus this rare woman makes even on earth more than full payment for her sin—if we may talk of sin in connexion with a nation that for centuries adored its Kings' mistresses and listened with surprised indignation when the *noblesse* presumed to yap in envious pasquinades against the monarch's free choice in love.

So, from her first tiniest success onward, the favourite's life was a slowly exacerbating campaign. Already when the young wife, fresh as the morning, of the Fermier Général Lenormand fled, lapped in the cushions of a sky-blue phaeton and swathed in rosy veils, from her *château* of Étioles to the King's hunting-train in the near-by forest of Sénart, she was fighting with the heart of Mme de Châteauroux, who, trembling inwardly, and the centre of malicious whispers, had to hold her place at her breathless lover's side against this charming acting. In her resolve to defend her menaced position to the utmost, the embittered lady is said to have been so severe afterward with a tattling woman who had dared to sing



# LA BELLE JARDINIERE

*Portrait of Madame de Pompadour, by Jean-Étienne Liotard, 1764. The original is a pastel, now in the collection of the Musée de la Ville de Paris.*

MME DE POMPADOUR AS "LA BELLE

Engraving after Carle van Loo

After the original



the little d'Étioles's praises to the King that the babbler fell down in a faint. Then, after Mme de Châteauroux's sudden death, was played the degrading comedy in which the hesitant lover was enabled by forged threats from the husband to save the adulteress as *maîtresse déclarée* from the consequences of her sin. Followed that at first half-sympathetic, then sullen toleration of the *bourgeoise déplacée* in a position to occupy which was a bold dream for even the noblest families in the land. And lastly there were the incessant intrigues of a clergy, backed up by the royal family, that was pretty sure this woman's proud self-will would never serve ecclesiastical ends.

But what were all the outward stings and smarts compared to the canker that fretted the very heart of this *liaison* ! “ Quel supplice d'avoir à amuser un homme qui n'est pas amusable ! ” groans La Maintenon faced with the walking corpse of Louis XIV ; and something of this torment of a condemned soul, this nervous fever of a dancing-slave who sees satiety rising in her master's features, must also have racked the concubine of Louis XV as she strove to dispel the *taedium vitae* of this incarnation of *ennui*. The Marquise herself had a dangerously cold temperament, which she was compelled to fan more and more recklessly into unnatural flame by means of love-philtres. At the very outset of her career the insolent *chansonnette* of an envious courtier had torn the veil from this wretched plight :

Eh quoi ! bourgeoise téméraire !  
On dit qu'au Roi tu as su plaire,  
Et qu'il a comblé ton espoir ?  
Cesse d'employer ta finesse ;  
Nous savons que le Roi ce soir  
T'a voulu prouver sa tendresse,  
Sans le pouvoir.

Mme du Hausset shakes her head over her mistress's frigidity in love despite her ardour of brain and warmth of heart ; and similar anxieties of the Marquise herself could be laid to rest by the Duchesse de Brancas, an intimate friend, only by a reminder of the King's bondage to habit.

In the light of this coldness in love it is easy to understand the woman's incessant and merciless fight against the rivals who, urged forward by a thousand intercrossing cabals, pressed on in ever fresh relays toward La Pompadour's entrenched position. True, the threatened woman's feminine charm easily foiled the arrogant

intrigues of a Marquise de Coislin, the treachery of Mme d'Estrades (who, in spite of her ugliness, hoped to enslave the King by crude sensuality). But, faced with the teasing charm of the young Comtesse de Choiseul-Romanet, La Pompadour could prevail only through the unscrupulous betrayal of written secrets by the Comtesse's cousin, Stainville, afterward Duc de Choiseul. And to the foreign, fascinating beauty of Mlle Romans, who could boast, into the bargain, a son of royal blood, the ageing Sultana went resigned, as though to her destiny, on a pilgrimage to the Bois de Boulogne. Hence the feverish struggle of the now faded woman to drug the King's morbidly awake senses by continually renewed delights of love; that slave-traffic in *petites maîtresses*, whose nude carnality was meant only to confirm La Pompadour's spiritual domination; that petty and degrading misery of the Parc-aux-Cerfs, which even the catlike charm of an O'Morphi could not transmute to the houris' paradise, and of which the hate-inspired imagination of the Revolution has told such tales.

So this woman, despairing of the almighty power of the heart, and even of the flesh, had recourse to the private warfare of the mind to defend her realm, attacked afresh every day. Hence her resolute devotion to politics, which Louis XV too dallied with all his life as one might with a plain sweetheart. A happy knack of observation, patience in apprehending others' peculiarities, and, above all, a suppleness at the right moment, where feminine obstinacy would defeat her ends, gave La Pompadour assured mastery from the very start. Proved statesmen like the Duc de Nivernois paid tribute to her ability, sat with the King's darling at the council-table, and even wooed the woman to secure the helpful insight of the diplomat. Président Meinières sits open-mouthed on one occasion, during the Parliamentary disturbances of 1757, before the eloquence and grip of facts with which the Marquise expounds the Crown's rights against the young hotheadedness of the clamorous people; and Bernis and Choiseul were spurred on to acquire political wisdom by rivalry with their friend's feminine penetration. Even the heavy blame for the Seven Years War, which an older school of historians, Collé and Duclos especially, had thrown on the woman's weak shoulders, is lifted from them by the judicious and just verdict of a later age: for the ignominy of incapable generals cannot dim admiration for La Pompadour's shrewd vision that saw growing in mightily upstriving Prussia the great enemy



MILI DI ROMANS  
Drouais

*Illustration Paris - Photo Winkler*

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MILLE DE ROMANS  
DROUAS





of her native land. Foolish and shortsighted are those countless pasquinades (called *poissons*, after the Marquise's maiden name) which from the very first day onward befouled like harpies the favourite's honour and reputation, and made the tormented woman, when pouring out her resentment to Maurepas and d'Argenson, Rességuier and Latude, belie to the pitch of inhumanity her otherwise impregnable good-heartedness.

More effectively, however, than all the cold and prosaic calculations of politics, a clever and versatile artistic gift helped La Pompadour in her life's purpose; it brought peace and calm, for moments at least, to her harassed soul, and it lit up her ambition-distorted features to a glory that will never fade while mankind can yield without reserve to the spell of perfect æsthetic culture. Even when still caressed by the King's first loving rapture, and able in her youthful charm to be merely amused at the opposition of a startled Court, the little d'Étioles had seen with alert shrewdness the incalculable increase of power that was bound to accrue to her unestablished position from the stage-fever of the age and her own precociously cultivated talent for acting. Under her fairy wand the Théâtre des Petits Appartements rose in the drear monotony of Versailles. Stubborn envy sank on its knees before the graceful, arch stage presence of the King's sweetheart; princes of the blood fought for even the smallest parts as special favours; the Dauphin himself, whom all good spirits shunned, readily played opposite the royal mistress and passed on her arm into the dream world of poesy. Moreover, there was the flood of exquisite music with which La Pompadour allayed the King's tortured soul, the amateur orchestra that played before the little Court stage; the Good Friday spell of the sacred concerts and *grandes motettes* in which the Marquise's own soft voice joined, along with the silvery soprano of a Marie Fel and Jélyotte's subdued baritone. Then there was the ever-varying fascination of the pictorial arts which the enchantress let flutter round her lover and herself like a flock of roguish cherubs. Under the guidance of the engraver Guay the industrious pupil bends, burin in hand, over the copper plate the painter Boucher has prepared for her. She sits to the sculptor Pigalle for a bust—the first work of its kind to be chiselled, much to the connoisseurs' delight, from native marble. To give her royal *amant* for a present that bit of witchery in pastel, her portrait by Latour, from which the bodily grace and cultural brilliance of her

whole epoch shine timelessly at the beholder, she puts up with the artist's outrageous rudeness, lets him go about his work in his shirtsleeves, looks on laughing when the surly bear growls the inquisitive monarch out of the room, and, in spite of his behaviour, secures the odious fellow a truly princely reward. Then in her brother, the Marquis de Marigny, La Pompadour as friend of art found an apt and loyal helper. She had sent the future Minister of Architecture to Rome for two years and entrusted the formation of his taste to experts and connoisseurs—an Abbé Leblanc, the engraver Cochin, and Soufflot, the architect. She had followed the progress of his education in letters full of solicitude and discernment; and thus she had planted, slowly and unconsciously, in the midst of the most luxuriant post-Baroque the seed of that change of style that, fostered by the renewed study of the antique and the magic world of recently resurrected Pompeii, was to reach final expression in the pedantry and neo-classicism of the Empire. Up to the last this able and scrupulous critic of artistic schemes stood at his sister's side, advising her especially in the matter of the fairy castles her ephemeral fancy scattered all over France. For the wild pursuit of almost untasted pleasure must pass from *château* to *château*; from the slavish ceremonial of Versailles to the spacious ruralness of the Maison Crécy at Dreux, which a woman's wish had created overnight on the exact model of the most luxurious Court life; from Crécy to the moonlight revels on the La Celle Canal at Marly; from La Celle to the magic *châtelet* of Bellevue below Meudon, into the elvish charm of which all the artistic genii of the century seemed to have slipped and be whispering confidentially. From this orgy of colour and shape, again, the pair fled to the forest solitude of the hermitage at Compiègne, or squeezed with one or two intimate friends into the cosy narrowness of the Château Choisy, finally tearing madly at the head of a reckless hunting-party through the autumnal forest to the hermitage at Fontainebleau. All these ceaselessly changing scenes, however, were but the frame for the yet more ceaseless arts of transformation by which the queen of fashion stirred her lover's inert senses to ever new delights. For each little thing, however indifferent, from toothpick to silk shoe, from Pompadour-blue brocade frock to the priceless string of pearls with which the King had coaxed away the tears of her last little fit of love's distress—all these the sorceress could enchant to the service of her beauty.











































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































